FABIAN SOCIETY

BETWEEN THE LINES

OPPORTUNITY AND ADVERSITY ON BRITAIN'S ROADS

Edited by Georgie Nelson, Iggy Wood and Miles Ward

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Acknowledgements

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About the editors

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FOREWORD

Being selected for the Fabian Women's Mentoring programme was transformative. It is a major reason why I am an MP. Now in its 15th year, the programme continues to nurture and develop talented women in politics. This year's mentees, Cohort 14, are only the second group to take part with Labour in government.

As part of their programme, I challenged the 26 women in Cohort 14 to develop policy or campaign ideas to improve road safety – an issue which is one of my priorities as an MP for the Congleton constituency. I have campaigned on rural road safety in particular, including on safer walking routes along high-speed roads and better mechanisms for tackling speeding and drink driving.

The mentees presented their proposals during a workshop day in parliament, and the results were exceptional. Every idea brought a distinct perspective and impressive depth of thought, with many shaped by the mentees' own lived experiences. I hope you enjoy reading the resulting collection.

Sarah Russell is the Labour MP for Congleton and a member of the Fabian Society's executive committee.

1. THE PROMISE OF E-SCOOTERS

Marta Haba / Daphne Wong

For several years, public debate around e-scooters in the UK has been dominated by a single theme: risk. Media coverage tends to focus on collisions, unsafe riding, and the legal grey zone surrounding private e-scooters. Yet this narrow framing often obscures a more important truth emerging from local government evidence, transport research, and ongoing parliamentary debate: micromobility is a transport opportunity as well as a safety challenge. If integrated correctly, e-scooters can support goals that sit at the heart of contemporary social-democratic thinking by reducing inequality, strengthening local transport systems, and accelerating the transition to net zero.

The UK's current approach, however, is fragmented. Rental e-scooters operate under extended trials, private e-scooters remain illegal on public roads, and local authorities face rising complaints without the capacity to enforce existing rules. The result is a system that is failing its users. As e-scooters proliferate, the absence of clear regulation, infrastructure, and education is creating avoidable risks while preventing the country from realising the wider benefits of micromobility.

A more coherent strategy, rooted in evidence, fairness, and practical investment, could transform e-scooters from a perceived nuisance into a valuable part of a modern, integrated transport system.

Transport inequality and the micromobility gap

In many smaller towns and rural areas, transport is structurally inadequate. Limited bus routes, infrequent services, and long distances between key destinations restrict access to jobs, education, healthcare, and public services. Research from local authorities and transport bodies has repeatedly shown that poor connectivity falls hardest on low-income households, young people, and those without access to a private car.

This is where e-scooters come in. Shared e-scooters and e-bikes offer flexible, low-cost transport for short trips and "last-mile" journeys, linking people to bus stations, rail hubs, and town centres. Evidence from UK trials suggests that shared micromobility can support decarbonisation, reduce congestion, and widen access to transport without requiring private vehicle ownership.

These benefits align closely with three priorities frequently highlighted in Labour-aligned transport discussions:

- Equitable access to opportunity.
- Decarbonisation and net-zero commitments.
- Strong local transport systems.

Yet these benefits will only be realised if micromobility is integrated deliberately – and not left to develop informally or chaotically.

Behaviour first: why education matters

The most visible problems associated with e-scooters are behavioural. In towns such as Colchester, it is common to see riders without helmets, without lights, or riding at night in ways that put themselves and others at risk. These behaviours heighten danger for pedestrians, motorists, and the riders themselves.

The UK's Road Safety Strategy has long emphasised the importance of education and behavioural change in improving safety outcomes. Active travel policy has similarly stressed that infrastructure, enforcement, and education must work together to reduce risk.

A targeted "Ride Smart" campaign could form the first step in a national approach. Piloted in university towns, where young riders are a high-risk group, such a campaign could:

- Encourage helmet use and visibility.
- Improve familiarity with road rules.
- Build partnerships between universities, councils, and local transport providers.

Evidence from other active travel campaigns suggests that targeted behaviour-change programmes can significantly reduce risky behaviours, particularly when combined with clear guidance and visible enforcement of the law. For local authorities with limited budgets, this is a low-cost intervention with the potential for immediate impact.

Light-touch regulation: clarity without barriers

Education alone cannot solve the problem. A major gap in current policy is the absence of clear, accessible regulation for users. Many riders simply do not know what is legal, what is safe, or what responsibilities they hold.

A light-touch digital licensing scheme could address this. Rather than creating barriers to access, it would provide clarity through a short online module covering basic road rules, safe usage, and legal responsibilities.

This approach reflects a principle often emphasised in social-democratic policy design: combining individual responsibility with system-level support. It also aligns with ongoing debates in parliament, where policymakers have repeatedly called for regulation to replace the current patchwork of trial schemes and legal ambiguity.

The aim would not be to restrict micromobility, but to standardise expectations and ensure that all riders, whether using rental or approved private models, understand the rules of the road.

Infrastructure and Regional Inequality

Even with better awareness and regulation, safety cannot improve without infrastructure. In many smaller towns, particularly in parts of the north, safe cycling and micromobility lanes are limited or poorly maintained. Riders are often forced into unsafe environments, discouraging adoption and increasing risk.

This mirrors broader patterns of regional inequality in transport investment. Active travel policy in the UK has long recognised that infrastructure is essential for behaviour change. Without safe routes, sustainable transport options remain inaccessible to most people.

Local authorities could implement light infrastructure zones, including clearly marked micromobility lanes, safer junctions, and improved signage.

These are relatively low-cost interventions, but evidence from active travel schemes shows they can significantly improve safety and accessibility. For towns with limited budgets, they offer a pragmatic starting point for modernising local transport networks.

Expanding Access: Rental Schemes Beyond Big Cities

Access remains a major barrier. Rental e-scooter schemes are concentrated in large cities, limiting their impact on transport inequality. Yet the people who

could benefit most, those in smaller towns, rural areas, and poorly connected communities, are often excluded.

Pilot programmes in smaller towns could focus on:

- Linking housing estates to town centres.
- Connecting universities to transport hubs.
- Improving access to local services.

This would support the shift toward integrated, multimodal transport highlighted in UK transport strategy, including the growing emphasis on "mobility as a service" and integrated local transport planning.

The challenge of private e-scooters

One of the biggest challenges in the current system is ambiguity. Private e-scooters are widely available, some for as little as £100 from major retailers. Yet they remain illegal on public roads and pavements. Most people do not have access to private land large enough to use them legally, creating a disconnect between consumer behaviour and the law.

According to government statistics, in 2024 more than half of recorded e-scooter user casualties occurred outside trial areas. Many of these incidents involved private scooters, which lack the safety features required of rental models, such as insurance, speed caps, geofencing, and mandatory lighting.

This lack of standardisation is a serious road safety issue. While it may not be feasible for every town to operate a rental scheme, the absence of clear guidance for private e-scooters leaves users, police, and local authorities in a difficult position.

Legislation could address this by:

- Approving specific types and models of e-scooters for road use.
- Standardising maximum speed and acceleration limits.
- Requiring mandatory lights, indicators, and braking standards.

This would mirror the approach taken with child car seats or e-bikes, where safety standards are clearly defined and enforced.

Enforcement and capacity: a realistic assessment

Rules require enforcement, and enforcement requires capacity. Police forces across the country report challenges in responding to complaints about

unsafe or illegal e-scooter use. Some constabularies have adopted creative approaches, such as using drones to track riders. Generally, though, enforcing the rules can put officers in danger, leave them at risk of legal dispute, or even cost them their job.

The result is a cycle familiar in other areas of transport enforcement: lack of capacity undermines public trust, which in turn fuels calls for more rules that cannot be enforced.

A joint approach involving police, local authorities, and NHS A&E departments could help identify shared challenges and develop realistic enforcement strategies. This could include determining appropriate age limits, identifying high-risk behaviours, and prioritising interventions that deliver the greatest safety benefits.

Education from an Early Age

Long-term cultural change requires early education. Schools can play an active role in teaching both users and non-users about:

- The benefits of micromobility compared to cars.
- The potential dangers and how to mitigate them.
- How to navigate roads safely as riders and pedestrians.

This mirrors existing approaches to cycling proficiency and road safety education. Embedding micromobility within these programmes would help normalise safe behaviour and build a generation of informed road users.

Conclusion

E-scooters reveal a transport system struggling to keep pace with public behaviour. They are widely used, yet operate in a legal and policy grey area. Private e-scooters remain illegal on public roads, while rental schemes continue under extended trials. For users, policymakers, and local authorities, the result is uncertainty.

Recent parliamentary debates and government consultations show growing recognition that regulation is needed to support safe, integrated use. The Department for Transport's trials, now extended to 2028, provide a foundation, but not a complete solution.

A comprehensive approach would combine:

- Clear legislation for approved private e-scooters.
- Education campaigns targeting high-risk groups.
- Investment in micromobility-friendly infrastructure.

- Realistic enforcement strategies.
- Expanded rental schemes beyond major cities.
- Robust, ongoing research to guide policy.

Micromobility is not a silver bullet; neither is it merely a safety concern. E-scooters are not going away anytime soon, and within the right framework, they can become a valuable part of a fairer, greener and more connected transport system.

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Marta Haba is a master's student in International Relations at the University of Essex and a mentee on the Fabian Women Mentoring Programme.

2. THE BEAUTY OF BLACK BOXES

Tara Booth

As the UK government develops its next road safety strategy, one proposal is attracting renewed attention. Namely, the requirement for newly qualified drivers under the age of 25 to use telematics - commonly known as "black box" insurance - for a limited period after passing their test.

While the idea raises questions about privacy and autonomy, supporters argue that the evidence points strongly in one direction. if introduced, a time-limited telematics requirement could significantly improve road safety, reduce public costs, and deliver wider benefits to communities across the country.

Is it time to game driving skills to save lives?

As a mother of two boys, I wanted them both to learn to drive because it is an important life skill. We also live in a rural area with poor public transport and, frankly, I didn't want to be a taxi service.

That said, once they had both passed their tests, the idea of them taking to the road unaccompanied terrified me.

The oldest – I'll call him smooth one – was a cautious driver and not keen to clock up the miles. When he got the keys to his car, he happily obeyed the black box – which kept an eye on his speed – and he didn't drive often.

The youngest, I'll call him smooth junior, has all the confidence of a second child and was desperate to drive everywhere, including an hour each way to college every day. His black box was a different beast. It didn't just monitor his speed – it noted cornering and braking too hard, too.

Smooth junior's black box operated a points system. He would start with 100 points which would fall if he drove too fast, cornered like he was on rails, or hit the brakes too hard. The insurance company warned that if he dropped to 30 points, he would risk losing his cover.

The black box was fierce. On his first journey, he lost 25 points, and we wondered whether his insurance would last the month. He said the box was "stupid" and he wanted it removed. We pointed out that the insurance was too expensive without it.

After a week of having the 'stupid' black box and dropping more points, he slowly adapted to the rules. He realised that driving well brought the points back, and began to see the black box as a challenge —a game, even.. He drove flawlessly, effectively gaming the box, until he got his points back.

Just four months later and he is cruising at 98 points. His driving is much better and everyone, himself included, is safer on the road. I'd like to see a black box in every new driver's car; it will save lives.

Why this issue demands attention

Road safety data reveals that young drivers constitute a persistent and disproportionate risk. The Reported Road Casualties Annual Report 2024 shows that drivers aged 17–24 make up just six per cent of UK driving licence holders yet are involved in nearly a quarter (24 per cent) of fatal and serious collisions.

The consequences are collective as well as personal. Road collisions cost the UK economy almost £42bn each year through NHS treatment, emergency responders, lost productivity and long-term care. These costs are borne by taxpayers, employers and families nationwide.

It is young men that are at the greatest risk. Official figures show that male drivers aged 17-24 have a "killed or seriously injured" (KSI) rate per billion miles that is four times higher than drivers aged 25 and over. This is not a marginal difference, but a structural safety challenge during the earliest years of independent driving.

How do we solve it?

In response to this challenge, the government is considering introducing a statutory requirement for all newly qualified drivers under the age of 25 to hold a telematics-based motor insurance policy for a minimum of one year from the date they receive their full driving licence.

The motivation is preventative rather than punitive: supporting safer driving habits during the period when the risk is the highest. Telematics systems monitor behaviours such as speed, braking, acceleration and time of travel, while providing drivers with feedback that helps them correct risky patterns early.

Evidence that telematics can reduce harm

There is already substantial evidence that telematics works. A 2023 report by the British Insurance Brokers' Association (BIBA) and the Automobile Association (AA) found that black box insurance was linked to an approximate 35 per cent reduction in collision rates among 17 to 19-year-olds over a six-year period.

International experience reinforces this pattern. Similar initiatives in New Zealand and Ireland resulted in around 22 per cent fewer collisions among new drivers. While a monitored 12-month learning phase in Ontario, Canada, reported a 16 per cent reduction in collisions per-driver .

Research from Cambridge Mobile Telematics in 2023 also found that the highest-risk drivers reduced dangerous behaviours by between 9 and 27 per cent after receiving telematics feedback — a clear indication that behaviour change is possible when drivers are given timely, relevant information.

Benefits that extend beyond young drivers

Although the proposal focuses on under-25s, its impact would reach much further:

Lower insurance costs

Motor insurance premiums are increasingly set using postcode-level risk data. When an area sees fewer crashes and fewer claims, insurers frequently lower premiums for all drivers in that location – not just young people. Parents, older motorists, local businesses and community groups could all see financial benefits.

A safer driving culture

A universal telematics requirement would help shift social norms. If monitoring is the standard rather than an exception, responsible driving becomes the expectation. Risk-taking loses its appeal, peer pressure declines, and safer habits are formed earlier - benefiting everyone who uses the road.

Environmental gains

Telematics promotes smoother, more efficient driving. That means lower fuel consumption, reduced emissions and less noise pollution, which provide particularly valuable improvements for both urban neighbourhoods and rural communities.

Engaging young drivers: making safety relevant and achievable

For any proposal of this kind to succeed, engagement matters. Advocates argue that the policy should be accompanied by a digital-first public engagement strategy designed specifically for 17 to 25-year-olds, using the platforms and formats they already rely on.

The focus would be practical and relatable, linking safer driving to lower living costs, independence and opportunity, rather than abstract safety messaging alone.

Key elements could include:

- Digital-first outreach, centred on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram and YouTube Shorts.
- Platform-specific content, using:
    - TikTok for quick explainers and myth-busting.
    - Instagram to show lifestyle and cost-of-living impacts.
    - YouTube Shorts for slightly deeper, scenario-based examples.
- Partnerships with trusted local creators, delivering short, authentic content that weaves in key statistics and real-life driving situations.
- Peer-led storytelling, helping behaviour change feel achievable rather than imposed.
- Clear cost messaging, emphasising that safer driving can reduce insurance premiums by 15-30 per cent – a powerful incentive during a cost-of-living squeeze.

By grounding the message in fairness, access to opportunity and safer neighbourhoods, supporters argue that the policy can be framed not as surveillance, but as support - helping young people succeed while protecting the communities they live in.

From market choice to policy opportunity

Telematics insurance already exists in the UK, but so far, uptake has largely been driven by price rather than safety objectives. That places responsibility for managing a significant public safety risk on individual choice alone.

Instead, a statutory approach would instead treat road safety as a shared responsibility, ensuring consistent support during the highest-risk driving period and maximising the public benefit.

A wider conversation about collective safety

Ultimately, the proposal to require black boxes for under-25s is not just about young drivers. It is about preventing avoidable deaths, easing pressure on the NHS, reducing economic loss and making roads safer for everyone.

As the government considers its future road safety strategy, telematics-based insurance for newly qualified young drivers represents a policy option supported by clear evidence. It has the potential to deliver not only safer roads but also fairer costs and stronger communities nationwide.

Above all, it could save young lives – and young lives matter.

Tara Booth is a writer and broadcaster supporting Markus Campbell-Savours MP for Penrith and Solway as his senior communications officer.

This essay was written with the help and support of Gulay Icoz, Sofie Surraco and Hani Abdulqadir.

3. THE CASE FOR RANDOM BREATH TESTING

Kam Nagpal

Road safety is one of the most successful areas of public policy in modern Britain. Over recent decades, improvements in vehicle design, infrastructure, education and enforcement have saved countless lives. Yet progress has slowed. Every year, hundreds of people continue to die in crashes involving drivers over the legal alcohol limit, while thousands more are injured. These are not unavoidable tragedies. They are preventable deaths, and Britain should be willing to learn from policies that have worked elsewhere.

One such policy is random breath testing (RBT). Despite its widespread use internationally, RBT is not currently permitted across most of Great Britain. Although police officers in England, Scotland and Wales can stop drivers at any time, they may only require a breath test if they suspect alcohol consumption, if a traffic offence has been committed, or if the driver has been involved in a collision. In practice, this means that enforcement is often reactive, with the law requiring risky behaviour, an accident or reasonable suspicion before action is taken.

The result is a system in which many drivers believe the chances of being caught are low. Research has repeatedly shown that the effectiveness of random breath testing lies not in detecting offenders but in deterring them. When drivers know they could be tested at any time, they are far less likely to take the risk of drink-driving. As the perceived likelihood of detection increases, behaviour changes accordingly.

This principle has been demonstrated around the world, with Australia often regarded as the leading example. RBT was first introduced in the state of Victoria in the 1970s before being adopted more widely across the country. Crucially, the policy was accompanied by highly visible enforcement campaigns, including roadside checkpoints and dedicated "booze buses", making the risk of detection obvious to motorists. The results were dramatic: studies found substantial reductions in alcohol-related crashes and fatalities. Moreover, evidence presented to parliamentary

inquiries has suggested reductions in fatal road traffic accidents of almost 50 per cent immediately after its introduction, with significant long-term benefits continuing thereafter.

Australia's experience is revealing, particularly as the policy was not universally popular when first proposed. In fact, civil liberties groups, industry representatives and some legal experts argued that random testing represented an unnecessary intrusion by the state. Similar concerns have been raised whenever major road safety reforms have been introduced: seat belt laws, motorcycle helmet requirements and smoking restrictions all faced opposition before becoming accepted features of public life. Public attitudes towards RBT changed rapidly once its effectiveness became apparent. Surveys in Australia found support increased significantly after implementation, especially among those who experienced the system first-hand and saw the benefits for road safety.

The evidence base extends far beyond Australia. RBT is now used in countries including New Zealand, Finland, Sweden, France and Ireland. The World Health Organisation has identified it as one of the most cost-effective road safety interventions available. Studies from New Zealand found that every dollar spent on random testing generated many times that amount in wider economic savings through reduced collisions, healthcare costs and lost productivity. International evidence consistently shows that increasing the perceived risk of being caught is one of the most effective ways to reduce drink-driving.

Britain, meanwhile, remains an outlier. The country has some of the lowest rates of roadside alcohol testing in Europe. A European survey found that only a small proportion of British drivers had been stopped and tested for alcohol in recent years, compared with a much higher European average. At the same time, many drivers underestimate both the likelihood of being caught and the risks associated with drink-driving.

The human cost remains significant. According to research by the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety (PACTS), between 210 and 240 road users were killed in drink-drive collisions in Great Britain in 2018. By 2021, the central estimate had risen to between 240 and 280 deaths. Thousands more people are injured each year in crashes involving drivers over the legal alcohol limit. Behind every statistic is a family whose life has been changed forever by an entirely preventable decision.

The case for reform has already been recognised by experts. In 2010, Professor Sir Peter North's independent review of drink- and drug-driving law, commissioned by the Department for Transport (DfT), concluded that wider breath-testing powers would be a highly desirable and cost-effective measure. The review recommended amending the Road Traffic Act 1988 to

provide police with a general power to stop and breath-test drivers. Sir Peter argued that such a reform would significantly improve both enforcement and public awareness of drink-driving laws. Yet sixteen years later, these recommendations remain unimplemented.

One argument against RBT is that it would place additional pressure on police resources. This is a legitimate concern. Road policing capacity has declined in many parts of Great Britain, and any expansion of enforcement powers must be matched by appropriate operational funding. However, evidence suggests that random breath testing is highly cost-effective. The economic costs of drink-driving collisions are enormous, encompassing healthcare expenditure, emergency services, insurance costs, lost productivity and long-term care for those seriously injured. Preventing even a relatively small number of serious collisions could offset a substantial proportion of implementation costs.

Moreover, Britain already possesses much of the infrastructure necessary to explore the policy further. The DfT has funded extensive research into drink-driving enforcement. Government-backed initiatives have supported the development of mobile evidential breath-testing technology and examined the operational feasibility of roadside enforcement. Academic institutions across the UK possess significant expertise in evaluating road safety interventions. The Road Safety Trust, Brake, PACTS and other organisations have already invested heavily in research and public awareness campaigns relating to drink-driving.

There is also a domestic example that is often overlooked. Since 2016, police in Northern Ireland have possessed powers to conduct random roadside breath testing. The legislation was introduced with broad political support as part of wider road safety reforms. While Northern Ireland's experience has not received the same attention as international examples, it demonstrates that random breath testing powers are already considered compatible with UK legal traditions and democratic accountability.

Of course, any proposal to expand police powers must be accompanied by safeguards. Critics are right to raise concerns about the possibility of disproportionate enforcement or discriminatory targeting. Comparisons have been made with controversies surrounding stop-and-search powers. These concerns should not be dismissed. Instead, they should be addressed directly through careful policy design.

A British model of random breath testing should operate through clearly authorised roadside checkpoints and designated enforcement operations. Selection processes should be transparent and genuinely random, rather than based on individual officer discretion. Data on enforcement activity should be published regularly to ensure accountability and identify any

disparities in implementation. Such safeguards would help ensure that the policy achieves its public safety objectives while maintaining public confidence.

Importantly, random breath testing should not be viewed as a standalone solution. The most successful international examples combine enforcement with public education campaigns. Australia demonstrated that highly visible enforcement, combined with clear public messaging, was essential to changing behaviour. The objective is not to maximise the number of arrests but to reduce the number of people willing to take the risk in the first place. Therefore, enforcement and education must work together.

For policymakers seeking evidence-based reforms, random breath testing represents a compelling opportunity. It is supported by a substantial international evidence base. It has been endorsed by independent experts. It enjoys considerable public support, with surveys consistently finding strong backing for expanded testing powers. It aligns with broader government objectives around public health, reducing preventable deaths and improving road safety outcomes. More importantly, it has the potential to save lives.

The UK already possesses the research expertise, funding mechanisms and operational experience needed to assess this policy properly. A sensible next step would be the introduction of a well-designed pilot programme in police forces in selected areas. These should be independently evaluated by academic researchers and funded through existing DfT road safety budgets. Such a pilot would generate robust UK-specific evidence while allowing policymakers to examine implementation challenges, costs and public attitudes. If the results mirror the experience of Australia, New Zealand and other countries, the case for national adoption would become overwhelming.

Road safety policy should be guided by evidence rather than inertia. The evidence is clear: Britain has spent decades debating a reform that many comparable countries implemented long ago. Hundreds of lives continue to be lost each year in alcohol-related collisions. We already know what works. The question is whether we are finally prepared to act on it.

Kam Nagpal is Cabinet Member for Decent Living Incomes at the London Borough of Ealing. She was first elected as a Labour Councillor in 2014 and represents the area of Southall Broadway.

4. 'GET OFF THE ROAD, BITCH'

Jennie Giovanell

Two days after we stood in parliament to make our case, the government announced new guidance for English councils on designing safer streets for women and girls. It made headlines. Ministers called violence against women and girls a "national emergency." Active Travel England committed to embedding a gendered lens into how they help design public spaces. Chris Boardman, the national active travel commissioner, described the finding that nine in 10 women feel unsafe walking at night as "appalling."[1]

It was welcome. It was overdue. And it said almost nothing about cycling.

This is the problem in microcosm. When we talk about women's safety in public space, we talk almost exclusively about walking. When we talk about cycling, we forget to ask why so many women are not doing it at all. Men make more than twice as many cycling trips as women in the UK.[2] Only 5 per cent of women cycle to work compared to 20 per cent of men.[3] Women are significantly more likely than men to say safety concerns stop them from cycling, a gap that has widened, not narrowed, over the past seven years.[4] These statistics are the predictable outcome of a transport system that has never seriously asked what it would take to make cycling work for women.

This is not just a transport problem

Cycling has a gender problem. But before we reach for infrastructure as the answer, we need to sit with a more uncomfortable truth. One woman described her daily experience like this: "I often feel that my journeys begin with me asking 'which way is least dangerous?' rather than simply 'which way shall I go home?'" She is not unusual in this – and her fears are well-grounded. According to the London Cycling Campaign's 2024 report, What Stops Women Cycling in London?, nine in 10 female cyclists have experienced abuse on the road, including verbal harassment, sexual threats, physical contact at traffic lights.[5] More than one in five have given up cycling altogether as a result. This is the same misogyny that makes women cross the road at night, that characterises the government's Vawg strategy,

and that Jess Phillips rightly calls a national emergency. It just happens to be happening on bikes.

Women are navigating something more insidious than traffic: a culture in which public space has historically belonged to men, and in which women who occupy it, alone, at speed, on a bike, are treated as transgressing. A driver who shouts "get off the road, bitch" is not making a cycling safety complaint. He is enforcing a boundary.

This insight is important because it means the solution cannot be infrastructure alone. Road safety and social safety are equally important for women on bikes. A well-lit cycle lane through a deserted industrial estate may score well on infrastructure metrics and still feel profoundly unsafe to a woman cycling home after dark. Safety is not objective; it is about experience. And women's experience of safety is shaped by a lifetime of navigating spaces that were not designed with them in mind.

Equality is the argument

Before we get to the evidence gaps, it is worth being clear about why this issue matters. There is a version of this discussion that frames cycling as a mere leisure activity; a nice-to-have for people who can afford good bikes and have the luxury of time. Yet women who cycle are overwhelmingly doing so for practical reasons – the school run, the commute, the shopping – taking zig-zagging routes that reflect lives shaped by care responsibilities that are still, in 2026, distributed unequally. Cycling, for these women, is about access: to work, to services, to independence. When women are driven off their bikes by harassment or fear, they do not simply lose a pleasant way to spend a Saturday morning. They lose time, money, and their freedom of movement in public space.

Our aim should be a society in which a woman can cycle to work without the worry that she will be shouted at and in which a girl growing up feels the road belongs to her as much as to her brother. Sustrans' children's walking and cycling index, published in February 2025, found that boys cycle regularly at almost twice the rate of girls in the UK.[6] We are raising a generation who have already absorbed the lesson that the road is not for women and girls. If we do not change the system now, we will hand that generation the same impossible choice we failed to fix.

This is a Labour argument. It is also just true.

We don't know enough, and that is the scandal

Here is what makes this inequality so urgent: we do not have the data to properly understand the problem, let alone fix it.

Transport for London investigated a spate of female cyclist deaths involving HGVs and found women were disproportionately at risk. No national study has followed. We do not know whether women are more likely to be caught in a lorry's blind spot at junctions, whether road positioning plays a role, or whether vehicle design is part of the picture. What we do know, thanks to a field experiment by researchers at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey School of Public Affairs, is that American drivers are nearly four times more likely to pass dangerously close to a female cyclist than to a male one.[7] Women in that study experienced tens of thousands more instances of dangerous passing every year than their male counterparts. There has been no equivalent UK study – a travesty that puts women at risk.

The government's road safety strategy, published in January 2026, states that perceptions of safety are the main barrier to cycling, especially for women and children. It is there in black and white. And yet the strategy contains not a single specific commitment to address it.

The new Active Travel England guidance on safer streets is a step forward for pedestrians. But the equivalent cycling infrastructure design guidance, LTN 1/20, was published in 2020 and makes no meaningful reference to gendered safety. The two pieces of guidance are now out of alignment. A woman walking her local streets may soon benefit from councils thinking explicitly about her safety while a woman cycling those same streets will not. LTN 1/20 needs to catch up, and it cannot catch up until we have the evidence base to inform it.

The private sector could act tomorrow

While the government commissions research and updates guidance, there is something the private sector could do immediately: something that costs nothing. Google Maps, Waze and together shape the journeys of millions of cyclists every day. Both default to the fastest route. But fastest is not safest, and safest is not the same for a woman cycling alone at night as it is for a man in the middle of the afternoon. A route via a well-lit high street might add four minutes to a journey and still be infinitely preferable to a shortcut through an unlit park. Navigation apps do not currently reflect this. They could.

Google Maps already allows users to avoid motorways, toll roads, and ferries. It already factors in road closures, elevation, and traffic for cyclists. Adding a "safer route" option, one that prioritises well-lit roads and busier streets, is technically achievable right now. What is missing is the will to treat women's safety as a routing priority, and the data to underpin it, which is precisely what the research programme we are calling for would generate.

Waze goes further by allowing users to report hazards in real time. Harassment incidents, dangerous close passes, poorly lit stretches: all of this could be reported, mapped, and fed back to local authorities to inform planning and infrastructure decisions. The technology exists; the gendered lens does not. Both are needed.

Navigation data at scale could transform what we know about where women feel unsafe on bikes, when, and why. It is the kind of private sector contribution that could complement public investment rather than substitute for it, and it could begin before a single piece of guidance is updated.

What we are asking for

The new Active Travel England walking guidance is a start, but the government must not stop there. We are calling for three policies.

First, a funded national research programme into gendered cycling safety. It should partner with a range of local authorities outside London – both urban and rural – with Cycling UK as an expert advisor, and use a combination of real-time bike sensor data, surveys, and interviews with women cyclists. The Road Safety Trust, the Rees Jeffreys Road Fund, and the Economic and Social Research Council all fund work in this space. Active Travel England has £25.6m set aside specifically for emerging priorities. Gendered safety falls squarely into that category.

Second, an urgent update to LTN 1/20 to bring it into alignment with the new walking guidance. Councils designing cycle routes must be required to consider the specific barriers facing women – not as an afterthought, but as a condition of funding.

Third, a requirement that navigation companies develop and promote safer routing options that reflect women's lived experience of cycling, and that the data those apps generate is made available to inform local authority planning decisions.

Underpinning all of this is the recognition that this is a Vawg issue as much as a transport issue. The DfT and the Home Office are meant to be working towards the same goal. They are not yet talking to each other. The cycling gender gap is not a quirk of preference or a failure of confidence. It is the

product of a culture that has, for too long, treated public space as only conditionally available to women.

Fixing it requires more than infrastructure. It requires the will to look clearly at what is happening on our roads, and the data to understand it. We cannot fix what we do not measure. And right now, we are not measuring.

Jennie Giovanelli is senior principal at Kettering Science Academy, a large, complex secondary school serving a diverse community, and inclusion lead for Brooke Weston Trust. She is a regular speaker and advocate for inclusion, organisational culture and equity in education.

Endnotes

[1] Active Travel England / YouGov polling, 25 March 2026. GOV.UK press release: Nationwide plans announced to design safer streets as 9 in 10 women report feeling unsafe walking at night.

[2] Cycling UK statistics, citing Department for Transport National Travel Survey data. Men make 2.5 times as many cycling trips as women in England. cyclinguk.org/campaigns/statistics

[3] Swapfiets / Censuswide survey of 2,000+ respondents, April 2024.

[4] Cycling UK / YouGov research, March 2025. Progress in cycling over seven years leads to fewer barriers for men, but leaves women behind. cyclinguk.org

[5] London Cycling Campaign, What Stops Women Cycling in London?, January 2024. Survey of over 1,000 women cyclists in London. lcc.org.uk

[6] Sustrans, Children's Walking and Cycling Index, February 2025. 28% of boys vs 17% of girls cycle five or more times weekly. sustrans.org.uk

[7] Humphrey School of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota. Bicycles, Gender, and Risk: Driver Behaviors When Passing Cyclists. Field experiment, Hennepin County, Minnesota, 2017. genderpolicyreport.umn.edu