

OPINION

‘Dispense with SUVs’ – let’s ban the sale of these dangerous and polluting cars

University researcher urges the Department for Transport to record and publish summaries showing the number of casualties according to the make and model of the vehicles involved, says **Lisa Hopkinson**

One of the eye-catching headlines following the UK Climate Assembly’s report was the recommendation to ban SUVs. However, you need to dig deep into the report to understand that this was part of a scenario which tested the trade-off between restrictions on more polluting cars and restrictions on how much people drive.

Members of the assembly, representative of the general public, voted to stop the sale straight away of the most polluting cars such as many SUVs, as well as bringing forward the date of the ban on all new petrol and diesel cars, rather than be charged or restricted more from using their cars.

Car manufacturers promote the cars they want us to buy – and the ones they want us to buy are the ones that increase their profit margins. SUVs don’t cost much more to manufacture than other cars, but command significantly higher prices.

These all-purpose vehicles are dominating car marketing budgets with massive growth in advertising spend on SUV campaigns compared with other vehicle classes.

In 2000, they accounted for less than 5% of new car registrations in the UK, while last year three-out-of-the-10 best selling cars were SUVs.

SUVs are currently the world’s largest automotive segment. Manufacturers have learned to build and market more profitable SUVs and we, the consumers, have been sold the dream.

Government policy is also to blame for this increase in heavier and more polluting new cars. Since the 2000 budget, Vehicle Excise Duty (VED) has been graduated according to carbon emissions as an incentive to drivers to buy vehicles with lower emissions. Over time more bands were introduced to increase the differential between the lowest and highest bands, giving car owners more incentive to buy a more efficient vehicle.

This sensible policy of graduating VED by carbon emissions was abolished in 2017 and it is no coincidence that fuel-hungry SUVs were the only segment to record growth in registrations in 2017. This move away from smaller, lower-carbon vehicles has contributed to the increase in average new car emissions over the past few years.

Many business leaders and NGOs were calling for a ban by 2030 in line with numerous other EU countries as well as China and India.

However, researchers from the universities of Oxford (UKERC) and Leeds (CREDS) argued that a single cliff-edge date will lead to

distortions and perverse behaviours in the new and second hand markets in the lead-up to the target date.

Instead, they proposed to end the sale of the highest emitting vehicles as soon as realistically possible, starting with the most polluting cars (CO₂ emissions of more than 255 g/km) from, say, 2022, and then the next band (over 225g/km) from 2023 and so on until only zero tailpipe CO₂ vehicles would be sold new.

Preliminary modelling suggests such a policy would save around 35 million tonnes of CO₂ between 2021 and 2030 alone. They argue that setting a clear market transformation approach will provide



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lisa Hopkinson is an environmental researcher with more than 30 years’ experience in Hong Kong and the UK in the charitable, educational and private sectors. She has variously worked as a consultant, campaigner, political aide and researcher.

She has worked on numerous sustainable transport projects, most recently a series of reports on carbon and urban transport (with acknowledgement to the tireless work of Professor Donald Shoup, Professor of urban planning at UCLA).



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certainty to manufacturers and consumers alike. [The Government has since announced a two-stage ban, starting with sales of new petrol and diesel cars and vans in 2030, following by plug-in hybrid and full hybrid from 2035, although a definition of the hybrid cars within scope is required after PM Boris Johnson said the extended deadline would only apply to vehicles that can drive a “significant distance” with no carbon coming out of the tailpipe.]

SUVs and heavier cars are not just an environmental issue, but a safety one too. While many people have bought SUVs thinking they are safer than regular cars, there is evidence from the US that they are less safe both for those inside and those

outside the vehicle.

Because they lull drivers into a false sense of security, drivers are encouraged to take greater risks. Their greater height also makes them twice as likely to roll in crashes and twice as likely to kill pedestrians by inflicting greater upper body and head injuries which they have less chance of surviving. In the US, the growth in SUV sales is being blamed on growing pedestrian collisions and deaths. A report by the US Governors Highway Safety Association found that, while pedestrian deaths in collisions with cars increased 30% from 2013 to 2017, those involving SUVs increased by 50%.

▲ A report in the US suggests that road fatalities involving SUVs rose 50% between 2013 and 2017

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The number of pedestrians killed and seriously injured (KSI) on UK roads in 2019 was the highest for more than 10 years. Worryingly, the UK Government doesn’t record passenger vehicle type in collision injuries and deaths.

Researchers Adam Reynolds and Robin Lovelace, from the Institute of Transport at the University of Leeds, told Forbes this is “masking a deadly problem created by the car industry”.

The pair have analysed police collision data and have identified pedestrians as 70% more likely to be killed if they were hit by someone driving a 2.4-litre engine vehicle than a 1.6-litre model. In other words, the bigger the engine in the car that hits you the more likely you’ll be killed.

Lovelace advises that: “To enable evidence-based policy in this life-saving area of research, the Department for Transport should publish summaries on the number of casualties by make/model categories to help understand the extent to which policies targeting vehicle type for road safety (not just environmental) performance could reduce the KSI rate.”

So what do we need to do? It goes without saying that we need to make it possible for people to live their lives without the need for a car. But this will take some time to get the necessary infrastructure and services in place. However, there are some immediate steps the Government can take to encourage people to buy less polluting and safer cars.

First, introduce a ban on the most polluting cars, including some SUVs by 2022, and a graduated phase-out of petrol and diesel cars up to 2030, when all new fossil fuel cars should be banned.

Second, reinstate the VED differentials for more efficient car models, as well as increasing fuel duty and company car tax. With pump prices significantly lower than a year ago this would be an appropriate time to increase fuel duty which has been frozen since 2010. This freeze means UK CO₂ emissions are up to 5% higher than they would have been, according to Carbon Brief, while the Institute of Fiscal Studies estimates it cost the UK Exchequer £11 billion in 2019-20 alone.

Last, Government needs to start recording passenger vehicle types in collision injuries and deaths to inform measures to improve vehicle and pedestrian safety.

The world’s first car ad in 1898 urged people to “dispense with a horse”. It’s time to update the slogan to “dispense with an SUV”.