

An aerial photograph of a two-lane road winding through a hilly, wooded area. Several cars are visible on the road, including two red cars and two dark grey cars. The road is bordered by a metal guardrail on the right side. The surrounding landscape is a mix of green trees and brownish, dry-looking vegetation.

Department for Transport
Car Ownership Qualitative Research

DfT | Car ownership

Full report | 13/05/24

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1. Executive summary

1.1 Background & objectives

Data suggests that patterns in car ownership and purchasing have been changing following the pandemic, the rising cost of living and the ongoing transition to electric vehicles.¹ This report provides qualitative evidence into current views and reported behaviours around car ownership to inform policy at the Department for Transport (DfT). It builds on an accompanying car ownership evidence review.² The overall objective of the research was to explore the current decision-making process and customer journey in relation to buying or relinquishing a car.

1.2 Method & sample

DfT commissioned Thinks to conduct qualitative research, with fieldwork running from November 2023 to January 2024 and comprising 40 x 60-minute depth interviews in England. Interviews were split between those who had recently bought or leased a car (15 participants), those who were actively considering doing so (15 participants) and those who had relinquished a car recently (10 participants).

A very small number of current owners of electric vehicles (EVs) were included in the sample – in the ‘recently purchased’ cohort, three participants owned a battery electric vehicle (BEV) and two owned a plug-in hybrid electric vehicle (PHEV). Given these small sample sizes, the findings about participants’ attitudes towards EVs should be treated with caution.

1.3 Benefits and drawbacks of car ownership

Car owners’ perceptions about the pros and cons of car ownership appear to be unchanged from previous studies,³ with participants identifying a range of benefits that outweigh the financial cost of ownership despite recent increases in the cost of living.

The key benefits associated with owning a car were: freedom, reliability, convenience, the ability to support others, comfort, and prestige. For the small number of current owners of EVs (BEVs and PHEVs) in the sample and those actively considering purchasing one, the primary benefits of EVs were financial, such as lower ‘running costs’ (a broad term used by participants to describe vehicle excise duty (VED), insurance, and fuel) and better fuel efficiency. While environmental impacts were mentioned, they were not the primary motivator for purchasing an EV.

¹ NatCen. (2024). *Car Ownership: Evidence Review*. Report to the Department for Transport.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Participants identified the financial costs of purchasing and running a car as the key disadvantages of ownership, and there was a sense that these costs had increased substantially in recent years for petrol/diesel cars. More general inconveniences such as difficulty finding parking, were also common disadvantages highlighted by participants.

For the small number of participants who owned EVs, the primary drawbacks were related to charging e.g. limited availability of chargers, the pre-planning of journeys to include charging stops, and the additional time spent waiting for cars to charge. However, EV drivers were generally comfortable with the trade-offs, feeling that the advantages (particularly the financial benefits) outweighed the drawbacks.

1.4 The car ownership journey

Participants were motivated to purchase vehicles in response to changing needs or circumstances, a desire for increased freedom and convenience or the deteriorating condition of their current car.

The core factors that shaped participants' decisions on what car to buy were:

- Finances, including the car's purchase and running costs and resale value.
- Participants' essential "needs" based on their circumstances (e.g. caring responsibilities determining the space needed) and personal "wants" (e.g. the 'look and feel' of the car).
- Perceptions about the reliability of the car.

Other purchase considerations related to government and local authority initiatives (e.g. lower VED for EVs, the impact of clean air zones, the car's environmental impact and the perceived impact of the car on the owner's self-image/social standing).

Leasing or buying cars on a personal contract purchase (PCP) was favoured by those with limited access to upfront funds and those who preferred more expensive vehicles or enjoyed driving new cars. Buying a vehicle outright appealed to those who could afford the full price upfront and those who preferred not to have to make monthly payments.

Purchasing a brand-new car was generally considered to be a significant expense, with those who could afford to do so valuing both the sense of accomplishment and peace of mind it offered. Participants generally chose to purchase second-hand vehicles as they had curbed their spending, due to the current economic climate, and the second-hand market represented a more affordable means of car ownership (despite higher used car values in recent years).

The process of purchasing was not linear with buyers cycling through a number of stages. However, the research identified distinct phases of activity: developing essential parameters; researching to refine parameters; researching to explore trade-offs; short-listing; purchasing/leasing.

1.5 Relinquishing ownership

Saving money tended to be the key motivation for participants who had relinquished car ownership. For some this was driven by recent increases in the cost of living which had increased the financial strain on participants. The viability of alternatives to car use was seen to be an essential consideration when relinquishing a car, particularly for those who were giving up car ownership altogether.

Online channels such as car resale websites were seen as a first port of call for those selling their car. Younger participants and car enthusiasts were more comfortable with this process and selling online in general, with older participants tending to sell via dealerships they were already familiar with.

Whilst relinquishing a car delivered the benefits that owners had been expecting (e.g. saving money) there were also negative impacts (such as a perceived lack of freedom). Those relinquishing ownership altogether found the change more challenging than those who retained at least one vehicle in their household.

Relinquishers were open to purchasing a car again in the future if their financial situation or replacement travel arrangements changed. While they had been able to manage since relinquishing, participants still felt having a car made their life easier overall.

1.6 Attitudes towards electric (including battery electric and plug-in hybrid) vehicles

All participants were asked about their attitudes towards EVs (BEVs and PHEVs), including the five participants who currently owned an EV and the 35 participants who did not.

Amongst those not currently driving/owning an EV, cost was the key barrier to ownership. Participants felt that the upfront cost of EVs was significantly higher than that of internal combustion engine vehicles (ICEVs). Participants who conducted further research into EV options also found that there were a limited number of cheaper second-hand EVs on the market relative to ICEVs. These affordability barriers prevented many participants who did not drive an EV researching them further.

Participants who owned ICEVs also expressed a lot of uncertainty around EV ownership. Concerns centred around whether there is sufficient charging infrastructure to cope with the widespread uptake of EVs, as well as how long EVs take to charge and how long the charge lasts. Non-EV owners also expressed concerns around the potential re-sale value of EVs, given perceived limited battery life. However, participants noted a trend in increasing EV ownership and said that as more people in their social circles purchase EVs, the more confident they expected to feel about switching.

The benefits and drawbacks perceived by non-EV owners in the sample broadly aligned with the experiences of the small number of EV owners in the sample,

but the EV owners were happy with their decision to purchase an EV, feeling the financial benefits outweighed any drawbacks.

Participants were broadly aware that the government is encouraging uptake of EVs but did not identify specific campaigns, schemes, or initiatives. There was general feeling that it is the government's responsibility to incentivise EV uptake through financial support.

1.7 Changes in attitudes, motivations, and behaviour

A key aim of the research was to understand how, if at all, participants' behaviour and views around buying or relinquishing a vehicle had changed over time. While participants found it difficult to clearly articulate specific changes, there was some indication that recent societal trends had, in some cases, impacted their car ownership journey.

Cost of living

The increased cost of living was generally considered a factor impacting decisions, especially for participants who had relinquished a car, but also in budget setting amongst car purchasers. To some extent, price increases in the new and second-hand car market impacted behaviour; however, it was increases in prices across the economy that participants felt had impacted their available budgets when considering purchase cost, vehicle specification, whether to buy or lease and whether to use the new or second-hand market.

Covid-19 pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic was also a factor which some people felt impacted their car ownership journey, largely as it had led to more working from home, thereby leading to less car use.

Moving towards sustainable transport

The introduction of clean air zones was also identified as a factor which shaped participants' purchasing decisions (and could in the future) with it serving as both an incentive and disincentive when selecting a car or choosing to relinquish one. Similarly, when participants were asked to theorise how their views may shift over the next five years, the main change that participants confidently predicted was the move towards lower emission modes of transport, such as EVs, as they become more normalised and more affordable.

At the time of the research, however, participants who did not already own an EV generally said they did not intend to purchase EVs themselves. Reasons centred around costs and uncertainties, which may change over time as EV ownership becomes more normalised, affordable, and better understood.

2. Introduction

2.1 Context and objectives

Data suggests that patterns in car ownership and purchasing have been changing following the pandemic, the rising cost of living and the ongoing transition to electric vehicles.⁴ This report provides qualitative evidence into current views and behaviours around car ownership to inform policy at the Department for Transport (DfT). It builds on an accompanying car ownership evidence review.⁵ The overall objective of the research was to explore the current decision-making process and customer journey in relation to buying or relinquishing a car.

2.2 Methodology

The fieldwork ran from November 2023 to January 2024 and consisted of 40 x 60-minute depth interviews in England conducted via Zoom or telephone. Participants were also asked to complete a pre task via MS Forms consisting of three questions to help them recall aspects of buying/leasing, actively considering or relinquishing a car ahead of their interview. More information on interview design as well as the topic guides can be found in appendix one: Methodology.

Analysis was conducted using a qualitative thematic approach. More information on the approach to analysis can be found in appendix two: Analysis.

2.3 Sample

Specialist market recruiters were used to gather a sample of 40 participants, using a combination of database and free-find methods. Careful consideration was given to ensure a spread across a wide variety of factors that could influence views and behaviour around car ownership, summarised below. A full breakdown of the achieved sample can be found in appendix three: Sample.

⁴ NatCen. (2024). *Car Ownership: Evidence Review*. Report to the Department for Transport.

⁵ Ibid.

Table 1 Sample specification

N=40 sample	Purchased a vehicle in the last 12 months (n=15)	Intending to purchase a vehicle in the next 12 months (n=15)	Relinquished a vehicle in the last 12 months (including reducing number of cars in household) (n=10)
Vehicle details	Mix within each audience of age of car, type of car (e.g. fuel type inc. electric (BEV/PHEV) vehicles, vehicle class, new vs. second hand), value of vehicle owned/considered/relinquished		
Purchasing details	Mix of different types of purchase/ownership from finance (HP (hire purchase), PCP (personal contract purchase)) to leasing, to outright purchase		
Socio-demographics	<p>Spread of socio-demographics (age, gender, life stage, socioeconomic group, household composition, ethnicity, rural/urban)</p> <p>Mix of (perceived) access to public transport, location/geographic spread and those who do and do not use their car to commute</p> <p>5 people with disabilities across the cohorts</p>		

3. Benefits and drawbacks of having a car

Key Findings

- Perceptions about the pros and cons of car ownership were unchanged from previous studies.⁶ Participants identified a range of benefits that outweigh the financial cost of ownership despite recent increases in the cost of living.
- The key benefits participants associated with owning a car were: freedom, reliability, convenience, comfort, the ability to support others, and prestige.
- For the small number of electric (BEV and PHEV) vehicle owners in the sample, the primary benefits of EV ownership were financial, such as lower running costs and better fuel efficiency. Potential environmental impacts were mentioned but were not a key motivator.
- The financial costs of both the initial purchase and the subsequent running costs were key drawbacks of car ownership. These had been exacerbated by the rising cost of living.
- For EV owners, the primary drawbacks of EV ownership were charging-related, e.g. availability of chargers, allowing for charging stops, and time taken for cars to charge. The trade-offs were deemed to be worth it with the benefits outweighing the drawbacks.

Participants were asked to describe their relationship with car ownership, and any changes they were aware of in recent years, to provide context for discussion of car purchasing/relinquishing.

3.1 Benefits of car ownership

Most participants were able to clearly outline a range of benefits associated with owning a car. The importance of these varied depending on their life stage, personal needs, and contextual factors. The six key benefits that were repeatedly raised across the sample were as follows:

- Freedom: allows control to travel the way they'd like and not have to plan their schedules around others.
- Reliability: often compared with using public transport and the disruptions associated with this.

⁶ NatCen. (2024). *Car Ownership: Evidence Review*. Report to the Department for Transport.

- Convenience: makes some practical tasks easier and feels like it helps save time.
- Comfort: seen as a personal space and often compared with the alternative option of travelling on public transport.
- Supporting others: allows easier visits to others especially in emergencies.
- Prestige: social status is often associated with a car.

Views of EV (including BEV and PHEV) owners on the benefits of car ownership

When asked about the benefits of owning a car, the small number of EV owners in the sample often focused on the benefits of owning an EV rather than the more generic benefits of car ownership listed above. These benefits typically included financial advantages such as better fuel efficiency and lower running costs.

"The benefits? I think depend on the type of car. If it's an electric or hybrid, I think it'll be more fuel efficient or won't need any fuel at all. So, I think I'll end up spending less money over all! I also think it'll be better for the environment."

(Suburban, Female 35-44, children at home, intends to purchase an EV vehicle)

While participants often mentioned a perceived positive impact on the environment, this did not seem to be a primary concern. Some participants also spoke about benefiting from governmental policy such as tax initiatives or being able to drive in places where higher emission vehicles were charged or no longer permitted.

3.2 Drawbacks of car ownership

Overall, participants reported fewer drawbacks than benefits associated with owning a car, however some disadvantages had been exacerbated by events in recent years particularly the cost-of-living crisis. Those who had recently purchased or were intending to purchase a car felt that the benefits far outweighed any of the disadvantages they identified.

The main drawbacks mentioned were:

- Financial costs: linked to both running costs, particularly fuel costs, and the upfront cost of the car.
- Inconvenience: often associated with parking difficulties particularly in urban areas.

Views of EV (including BEV and PHEV) owners on the drawbacks of car ownership

The small number of participants with EVs noted a specific set of downsides to owning these types of vehicles. These concerns all centred on inconveniences

linked to charging – specifically the number of chargers across the UK, the pre-planning of journeys to include charging stops, and the additional time spent waiting for their cars to charge.

"For just back and forth to work it's great. But for longer journeys, you have to plan ahead and it takes longer. For example, on my way to Heathrow, it's 280 miles, so with the car I have, you have to stop. You also need to find a fast charger, so that you only wait for 30 mins rather than longer."

(Urban, male 55+, children no longer at home, recently purchased an EV)

However, EV drivers were generally comfortable with the trade-offs, feeling that the advantages (particularly the financial benefits) outweighed the drawbacks.

4. The car ownership journey

Key Findings

- Participants were motivated to purchase vehicles due to changing needs or circumstances, a need for increased freedom and convenience or the condition of their current car.
- The core factors that shaped buyers' decisions were: their finances, their essential "needs" and personal "wants" and the perceived reliability of the car. Other considerations related to government initiatives (e.g. lower VED for EVs), the car's environmental impact and the owner/driver's social standing.
- Leasing or buying on a PCP (personal contract purchase) was preferred by those who favoured more expensive vehicles, those who enjoyed driving new cars and those with limited access to funds. Buying a vehicle outright appealed to those who could afford to pay the full price and those who preferred not to make monthly payments.
- Purchasing a brand new car was a significant expense but it offered both a sense of accomplishment and peace of mind. The second-hand market represented a more affordable means of car ownership especially for those who had curbed their spending due to cost-of-living concerns.
- The purchase process is not linear and buyers cycled through a number of distinct stages: developing essential parameters; researching to refine parameters; researching to explore trade-offs; short-listing; purchasing/leasing.

4.1 Prompts/triggers for purchasing a car

Participants outlined several common triggers/motivators that prompted them to purchase a car. These ranged from responding to changing personal needs and motivations to the deteriorating condition of their current car.

Responding to changing needs/circumstances

Lifestyle or life stage changes were one of the most prevalent triggers/motivators for purchasing a car. These changes often included family dynamics, e.g. having children or having to help care for aging parents, which can increase the need for larger or additional vehicles.

"I've got different responsibilities now, and I need to have a car regularly. I need to know that I can jump in my car, pick my

mother up, take her shopping, take her to her appointment, and she's gonna be comfortable.”

(Urban, female 55+, children at home, intends to purchase)

Changes in employment resulting in different commuting needs could also push participants to purchase vehicles, as could relocation to places where there was limited public transport, or less access to key amenities. Some participants cited changes in financial circumstances such as getting a large bonus or losing a source of income which could lead to ‘treating’ themselves to a newer vehicle, or, conversely to trade their car in for a more affordable model.

The condition of their current car

The deterioration of participants’ current vehicles was also a prevalent motivation to upgrade their cars, largely to avoid the inconvenience and cost involved in maintaining older cars.

“I just want something bigger and newer. Next year my car will be 10 years old, and while it is still good, it will probably start having problems in a couple of years. When the car gets built up mileage, then problems can start. So I'd like to prevent this and having to spend money on future repairs.”

(Suburban, female 35-44, children at home, intends to purchase a hybrid vehicle)

For those who leased or used PCP to finance their cars, a lease coming to an end presented an opportunity for them to experience a ‘fresh’ vehicle. This was particularly the case for those who truly enjoyed the experience of driving newer cars.

Intrinsic motivations

A key trigger to buy a car was a desire for increased freedom and convenience. Freedom was particularly important for younger people, who were at a stage in life where they wanted more independence, which a car could offer and represent. Participants also spoke about desire for the convenience gained with car ownership, especially compared with what they felt were the challenges associated with public transport or active travel. In some cases, participants’ desire for more reliable transport or more comfortable commutes had driven them to purchase a car.

External and social influences

Extrinsic factors like societal pressure were less prevalent but nonetheless triggers/motivators for purchasing a car. This usually presented as a desire to meet expectations (both self-imposed and/or external) to own a certain type of car that reflects their lifestyle, social circle, and public image. Some participants mentioned, for example, in recent years it has become socially desirable to be,

or be seen as, more 'sustainable'. A few participants spoke about the need to 'keep up with the times' by moving away from ICEVs and getting an EV. However, participants did not consider environmental benefits to be the primary motivator for purchasing an EV.

"Among my friends and family I am one of the last ones to still use a petrol vehicle. Everyone wants to be up on tech and innovation [and I] want to contribute to the environment."

(Urban, female 25-34, children at home, intends to purchase a hybrid vehicle)

Government and local authority sanctions and initiatives like clean air zones were seen by some to effectively push people to purchase cars that are more suitable for the areas in which they travel most. For those residing in zones that penalise the use of high emission vehicles, they have had to consider the costs and consequences of owning such cars. Consequently, participants generally felt that in this situation it simply made sense to trade in or purchase a different car.

Case study: Lucia*

(Rural, female 35-44, children at home, intends to purchase a hybrid vehicle)

Lucia is a mum of two young children who lives in a small town on the outskirts of Cambridge. The increased cost of living has been difficult, so she has been trying to change her spending habits by making an effort to reduce grocery bills and buying her petrol at the cheapest filling stations.

She uses her car daily to drive the children around and anticipates that her use of the car will increase as the children get older. She has been considering replacing her current car for the past few months, as it is a bit small and will soon be 10 years old, and would like to trade it in before it develops any costly problems. She's considering getting a hybrid or electric because she thinks it will be more fuel efficient and will save her money in the long term.

She is delaying her purchase until the new year (2024), so she can watch the market, as she hopes the prices will fall. When she does purchase, she intends to go to a dealership because while she bought her last car online, this time she wants to "see how it feels".

Overall, she's found the process of looking for a car quite tough:

"It's been really overwhelming! And places like [redacted] have so many options and prices. It's really difficult to find the right car and there is a lot of information. It's hard to whittle it down and quite stressful"

*Names have been changed to protect anonymity.

4.2 The factors that shape car purchase decision making

Finance

When deciding to purchase a vehicle, financial concerns were by far the most influential factor that shaped people's buying decisions. Affordability was generally the top priority. For participants this meant being able to afford the initial costs, as well as running costs, taxes, and incidentals.

"Cost was the main factor. I used [a car valuation website], which gives you an indication of how much you should be paying for a vehicle, considering the age and milage and such. Then considering insurance, I got quotes from different websites to get an idea of how much it would cost me."

(Urban, male 45-54, children at home, recently purchased)

For those who already owned a vehicle and intended to trade it in, the price they could get for their current car was also a key factor as it had a significant impact on their budget. Similarly, and particularly for those who swap cars frequently, the potential re-sale value of their new car was also a key consideration. They wanted to ensure that whenever they chose to sell the vehicle, they would recoup a satisfactory amount of money.

Essential needs

Second to financial considerations, was the suitability of the car to meet their 'essential' needs. Overall, most participants were able to identify the top priorities on their list when purchasing a vehicle, such as a larger car and more spacious boot to accommodate their family or assisted parking for their mobility needs. Participants were willing to trade off certain features but typically had a few 'non-negotiables' depending on their needs e.g. parents who wanted larger cars or bigger boots.

"Well first of all if it's big enough to buy the products that we need to buy for the cafe and put everything into the boot. We've got a dog, a big dog and so room in the boot for him. Third of all I do have to like the look of it."

(Rural, female 35-44, children at home, recently purchased)

Personal preferences

Personal preferences in terms of the 'look and feel' of their vehicles were also key factors. These more 'aesthetic' preferences included brand, materials, and design along with specific features that add to comfort levels such as heated seats.

"I want big and comfortable. I'd like good tech, touchscreen dashboard, so those sorts of things. And comfort, leather seats. newer cars are more sophisticated."

(Urban, male 45-54, children at home, intends to purchase)

Aesthetics tended to be more important for those who were interested in more premium/luxury cars, who were much less likely to compromise on aesthetic features given the high price points of their vehicles. Generally, participants were willing to compromise on non-essential preferences such as assisted parking and colour of car, and trade them off for more critical features.

Reliability

Reliability was a determining factor as this underpinned many of the benefits of car ownership. Perceptions around reliability were impacted by the condition of the car, e.g. mileage, service history, battery life (for EVs).

Some participants also had definitive parameters of what constitutes a reliable car e.g. only 3 previous owners, or a maximum of 60,000 miles. Participants' trust in brands also impacted their perceptions regarding reliability, as well as where they purchased the car. Some believed dealers had more reliable and trustworthy vehicles than private sellers due to commercial obligations e.g. safety checks.

"So even though it didn't have everything I wanted, I was impressed with the fact that it had a full service history by [redacted], the main dealer, and they also had a low service, low mileage history on it, which I could verify."

(Urban, male 45-54, children at home, recently purchased)

External factors

External factors such as some government policy, environmental concerns and social considerations impacted decision making. Government and local authority initiatives such as clean air zones, Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTNs), tax benefits and public charging infrastructure meant some participants were incentivised to purchase vehicles that would work best within their local context. For example, this meant that some were incentivised to consider cars they otherwise might not have, like EVs.

"I'm looking at the government's target to eliminate petrol engines and the date for that and how that fits with what I think about electric cars and the infrastructure. There's a decision to make in that area as well."

(Rural, male 55+, children at home, intend to purchase)

Environmental considerations were also a factor for those interested in EVs. Although these were not as big a motivator as fuel costs.

Social considerations and perceptions were a less prevalent but nonetheless present factor in their decision-making process. The type of car they purchased was shaped by the type of self-image they were interested in crafting.

"More modern is about keeping up on social media. Everyone has new new new, if you have something old you feel left behind. Now I'm older I want to level up in my life. People are bonkers with new cars on social media especially influencers, they have 5 cars all wrapped, really big SUVs. I want to keep up but I'm torn between going with something I like as well."

(Urban, female 18-24, living with parents, intends to purchase)

4.3 Preferences for type of purchases

Participants discussed their preferences about how they financed their car purchase, as well as their decisions around whether to buy new versus second-hand. These were important factors that shaped the car ownership journey.

Leasing/PCP vs. ownership

In the sample, there was a mix of participants who chose to either lease/finance their car on a PCP⁷ or purchase their vehicles outright. Leasing/PCP was particularly popular for those who preferred to have new or more premium/luxury vehicles with higher price points. It was also appealing to those who had limited access to funds, as it made the purchase more financially manageable, or enabled them to afford a car that would otherwise be outside their budget.

[On deciding to lease] "The money, because it's cheaper. It's kind of like under warranty, you feel a bit more protected. I don't have that lump sum of money to find. It's just easier to do it through the company, really.

(Urban, female 55+, living alone, intends to purchase)

Leasing/PCP also appealed to those who viewed themselves as 'car enthusiasts' as they appreciated the opportunity to frequently upgrade or swap vehicles. The ability to access newer cars via these routes could also offer some people peace of mind. This included some people whose contracts meant they were less likely to have to deal with the maintenance issues that typically accompany ownership themselves, thereby saving on stress and the need to organise repairs. Some also felt that this would save them some money in the long run.

Conversely, for those who chose to purchase a vehicle outright, most viewed their car as an asset they wanted to own from the start, which was preferable to leasing/financing the purchase of a car. This offered a more 'real' sense of ownership, and some also felt it allowed them to have a full sense of autonomy e.g. being able to upgrade the car with tinted windows.

Whilst the leasing/PCP route could offer those on a limited budget value for money, for others it was also preferable to buy an affordable car outright, to avoid the stress of affording monthly lease payments. For a few, there was also some anxiety around leased/PCP financed vehicles due to uncertainty around responsibilities and reimbursement in case of accidents or maintenance. They

⁷ Personal contract purchase (PCP) is a car financing option that offers a lower monthly payment compared to traditional car loans. A portion of the PCP loan is left until the end of the contract, at which point the individual has the option to clear the remaining balance with one large final payment (called a balloon payment) and own the car outright.

felt this meant that they would need to have accessible funds available for unforeseen circumstances, thus negating some of the financial advantages.

New vs. used

When asked about the decision to purchase new vehicles or used vehicles, participants acknowledged that purchasing a brand-new vehicle is a big expense. For those who could afford to do so, they often reflected on the peace of mind new vehicles offer, as they do not have any of the challenges associated with 'wear and tear'. For some, new vehicles were appealing as they provided them with a personal sense of accomplishment, and for others the purchase helped them solidify their (perception of their) social standing. For some older participants and retirees, buying a new vehicle was felt to be a 'treat' that reflected their life stage and was seen as a reward for years of hard work.

Conversely, other participants reported that due to the current/recent economic climate, they have had to reel in their spending habits over the past few years. Lower income participants in particular noted that they would not be able to afford a brand-new car, and that the used car market was their only means of accessing car ownership. The increases in used car prices did not impact this view as used vehicles still offered better value for money relative to new cars.

"It's definitely going to have to be second hand, I don't think I can afford a new car. I just don't want to spend that kind of money, it's going to be a lot."

(Urban, female 35-44, children at home, intends to purchase a hybrid vehicle)

4.4 The five-stage process of purchasing a car

While some participants provided a relatively linear description of a "journey", others were much less linear in how they described their approach to purchasing a car. As such, the stages outlined below are fluid and individuals may cycle through them multiple times and/or engage with multiple stages at any given time.

Once prompted to consider purchasing a car, the process can be broadly understood using the following key stages:

1. Developing essential parameters

The first stage of the process is deciding whether a different or additional car is needed. During this process, participants consulted with those closest to them (e.g. partners, family members) who would either be impacted by the decision or could help shape and validate their decision. Once decided, participants began mapping out the essential criteria for their car. At this stage their essential needs and personal preferences (e.g. a bigger car or more fuel economical) were most important, alongside the available funds. In

this phase, they also started to calculate what they could afford for both upfront and ongoing running costs.

2. Researching to refine parameters

Once the essentials had been decided, participants actively searched the market to acclimatise themselves with the available models and vehicles and refine or adjust their expectations. This stage often involved browsing websites to understand what was available within their price range and what compromises they likely needed to make.

If participants were considering making the shift to EVs, at this phase they conducted initial research (focussing predominantly on price). Based on this research they would decide whether they wanted to narrow their search down to only these types of vehicles. However, participants were often put off by the initial cost of EVs, and discovered what they felt was a limited second-hand market relative to ICEVs. This was enough to restrict many participants to ICEVs.

Participants considering the shift to EVs also researched the range of EVs (i.e. the distance they can travel on one charge) at this stage. As with the initial costs of EVs, perceptions about the limited range of EVs was a barrier to some participants researching the possibility of EVs further.

Participants generally visited an online automotive marketplace site, as they felt it was the most convenient and had the largest variety of options. At this stage they also sought insight from family and friends as the most trusted source of advice, as participants believed they had their best interests at heart. As such, friends and family played a very influential role in decision making. This was particularly true of female participants, who conferred with their male partners and friends as they perceived them to be more knowledgeable about cars.

"I talked to my husband and showed him vehicles, as he's a bit more clued up. It was the one I chose and decided to go for ultimately, but I did consult him and ask his opinion on things - he also came with me down to the garage to have a look at it"

(Rural, female 45-54, children at home, recently purchased)

Participants also tended to trust the official brands' websites when gathering research on a specific vehicle. Even if they intended to purchase the car from private retailers or second-hand, they preferred to get information directly from the manufacturer. Another source of advice used by participants was online user generated platforms, like YouTube. These spaces appealed particularly to younger people who were interested in hearing other users' reviews and experiences of the vehicles they were considering purchasing.

3. Researching to explore trade-offs

After immersing themselves in the market, participants' aim then shifted to determining what features they valued most and what trade-offs needed to be made to find a suitable car. Participants often spent a lot of time comparing different makes, models, and brands to see which could offer them their priorities within their budget and thus offer the best value for money.

"I've been reading articles on comparison websites, for models, emissions road tax, reliability etc. I'd like to get electric so what's the warranty on the battery so those sort of things. Also mileage, but it has to be SUV and electric if possible depending on price, if not a plug-in hybrid. I'm also looking at emissions as I'm conscious of the impact on the planet in the long run."

(Urban, male 45-54, children at home, intends to purchase an EV)

4. Short-listing

At this stage, participants began to curate a short-list, based on the availability in the market. For those purchasing brand-new vehicles, limited availability, which participants felt is more prevalent post-pandemic due to supply chain issues, sometimes meant waiting for an extended period to get a car with their desired specifications. Those purchasing second-hand had to choose from what was currently available. Following short-listing, buyers then considered their finances to make sure that their chosen selection would be affordable both initially and in the long term (i.e. taking into account running costs and, in some cases resale value). At this stage they often arranged to see the cars in person, as participants often said they did not feel comfortable making such a large purchase online.

"I spent a lot of time on the internet going on various car marketplace sites, looking for particular cars, but then I had to kind of narrow it down because I had quite a few different cars that we were interested in. Then I had to go and visit different showrooms and dealers, until I found the vehicle itself that I wanted...Then obviously looking at different insurance groups that the cars will basically rank in."

(Urban, male 45-54, children living at home, recently purchased)

Participants also valued the 'feel' of the car and needed to test-drive it to ensure it met their requirements for comfort, safety, sturdiness, and aesthetics. After comparing the short-listed vehicles, some were ready to make a final decision. Those who did not feel ready to decide paused for further research and reflection and/or cycled back through the process. Participants frequently described a process of repeatedly cycling through the process outlined here before settling on a final decision.

5. Purchasing/leasing

Once ready to purchase, some opted to do so online while others preferred to visit the dealership or meet with a private seller. Participants generally preferred to buy from companies or dealerships rather than individuals, if possible, as they believed that they were more trustworthy and so the transaction would be less risky.

"I tend to go to the dealership because I want the best and they are more trustworthy as they can do all the checks versus private persons"

(Suburban, female 45-54, children living at home, intends to purchase an EV)

At the point of purchase, participants often negotiated in the hope of achieving a discount on the advertised price. This was a particularly important part of the process for those who were trading in an existing vehicle and hoped to recoup as much as possible. After agreeing on a price, payments were made, or contracts signed, and this brought the journey effectively to an end.

5. Relinquishing ownership

Key Findings

- Saving money tended to be the key motivation for participants who had relinquished their car, some had been driven to give up their car by the increased cost of living. Considering the viability of alternative modes of transport was essential when relinquishing a car.
- Those selling their car looked first to online channels. This was particularly the case for younger participants and car enthusiasts while older participants tended to sell via dealerships they were already familiar with.
- Relinquishing a car delivered expected benefits such as saving money but also negative impacts, like a perceived lack of freedom. Relinquishing ownership altogether was more challenging than simply reducing the number of vehicles in the household.
- Relinquishers were open to purchasing a car again in the future if their financial situation or replacement travel arrangements changed. Although able to manage without a car, participants still felt having a car made their life easier overall.

5.1 The factors that shape the decision to relinquish

Finance

Saving money was a key motivation for those who relinquished car ownership. For some, the decision to relinquish was due to a recent strain on finances that was discussed in the context of the increased cost of living. They found an increase in food costs and utility bills over the past couple of years had forced them to give up their car to be more comfortable financially.

The idea of saving money was primarily linked to the ongoing cost of running the car which participants explained was rising, rather than the cash from a sale. Maintenance and repair costs also came up as a concern, with lower income participants more likely to have older vehicles and therefore be more concerned. The cost of repairs was considered too expensive, and some participants in this group faced the choice of paying for expensive repairs or relinquishing their vehicle.

Others were not forced into their decision to relinquish because of their financial situation but were financially motivated to reduce the number of cars in their household. They weighed up the benefits and drawbacks of owning their car and ultimately decided to go down to one car, or in some cases no cars, and put the money from the sale and money saved on running costs into their savings.

Some participants felt they had a car 'just sitting on the drive' and therefore felt they may as well sell the car and put the money towards something non-essential, like a holiday or to treat their friends and family. Others relinquished their car specifically to put money towards a large purchase, like a deposit for a house which, after weighing up the benefits and drawbacks, was considered a higher priority than having a car.

For those living in London, congestion charges and the cost of driving in the Ultra Low Emissions Zone (ULEZ) were added financial influences which were also considered in the decision to relinquish. However, they were always secondary to the rising cost of fuel, insurance and maintenance costs which were seen to be the main financial drawbacks of owning a car.

Case study: James* (*Urban, male 35-44, children living at home, recently relinquished going from two cars to one car in the home*)

James is an engineer who lives and works in Liverpool. He recently chose to sell his car as he found running it to be expensive, particularly the costs associated with maintenance, insurance, fuel, and parking. He was also motivated to sell because of financial aspirations; he hopes to use the money he saves to invest in home ownership.

For James, the transition away from owning a car was feasible because he works with one of his best mates who gives him a ride to work, meaning he can avoid using public transport for his daily commute. However, he feels that his social life has changed 'drastically', as he now goes out much less.

In the future he hopes to be able to repurchase a car and would consider getting an electric vehicle. Though, at present, he doesn't feel he knows enough about them, particularly in relation to their cost-effectiveness.

"I need to check the internet to see the disadvantages, but I think the pluses outweigh the negatives! From what I can see it's working well in society and people are enjoying them."

*Names have been changed to protect anonymity.

Decluttering

Some participants (e.g. those who had gone from two cars to one) relinquished on the basis that it felt 'pointless' to have cars that they were not using. This wasn't a financial decision, but did provide a latent financial benefit from gaining money from the sale and reducing ongoing costs. For those who were passionate about cars, this was a case of reducing from a high number of cars to a lower number.

This desire to declutter was a motivation that developed over a period of time, with an eventual realisation that the vehicle was not needed. These participants often needed an external push to finally make the decision, such as their partner

suggesting that they relinquish, realising their family member isn't going to use it, or someone making an offer to buy the car.

"My wife said 'they're sitting there, rotting, why don't you get rid of them'. They were there for 6 months. I hadn't thought about it, I'd been busy."

(Rural, male 35-44, children living at home, recently relinquished going from six cars to three cars)

Viability of alternatives

Thinking about the viability of alternative transport options was an essential consideration for those relinquishing a car. This was especially important for those relinquishing altogether but was also a consideration for those going from two cars to one who needed to 'plug the gaps' when sharing a vehicle with others in the household. This was less of a consideration for those still with multiple cars, as there were few/no significant changes after relinquishing one of their cars.

Public transport was the main alternative considered to replace travel by car. The transition to exclusively using public transport was more appealing for those living in London, particularly inner London, as they tended to already be using public transport for a lot of their journeys.

"Living in London, having a car is really not essential. I would ideally like to have a car as its more convenient for socialising, but you really don't need it."

(Urban, male 25-34, living alone, recently relinquished going from one car to no car)

Car-sharing outside of the household was sometimes described as a viable option if a nearby friend or colleague was a driver, though this was less about sharing and more of a reliance on others to provide lifts. Where a participant was dependent on someone else for their commute, they were conscious they may be left without transport to work and so would need to have a viable alternative in those instances. There was also an awareness that their job and relationships may change in the future, but while they were in their current circumstances some felt they could make do without a car and look to purchase again in the future if needed.

"I just use my girlfriend's car or she drives... I'm a labourer at the moment, so my uncle picks me up in his car and we go to work."

(Rural, male 25-34, living alone, recently relinquished going from one car to no car)

Comfort and mental health

While having a car was commonly associated with convenience and comfort, driving was described as a source of stress for some. This included waiting in traffic, particularly if it made them late for work/an appointment, as well as the behaviour of other drivers and looking for parking.

"Traffic was bad... I was sitting in traffic too long. I was feeling stressed driving, although the convenience has been something I liked."

(Urban, female 55+, children at home, recently relinquished going from one car to no cars)

In contrast, using public transport was appealing due to not having to worry about parking, navigating, or dealing with other drivers. Buses were seen to be a comfortable and enjoyable mode of transport for some, as they were able to look out of the window and enjoy the view, as well as use their mobile phone.

"I love getting the bus... You get to see the streets, it's more relaxing and you have internet so you can look at your phone."

(Urban, male 25-34, living alone, recently relinquished going from one car to no cars)

Within the group of people reducing their numbers of cars rather than relinquishing altogether, a few participants were motivated to relinquish so they could purchase a more comfortable or suitable car. For example, using the savings from a relinquished second car, so that the one car they do have is more luxurious or comfortable for their needs.

Physical health

To a lesser extent, participants outlined health reasons as a motivation for relinquishing their car. For some this was a conscious decision they made themselves to improve their physical health, and for others this was on the recommendation of their doctor. Walking was seen to be the best option for a healthier lifestyle. Participants discussed walking to where they would have previously driven and using public transport as it required them to walk to the bus stop or the train station.

"Because of his [husband] health, he was told he needs to do more exercise. He walks to the doctor or the dentist, or he'll get the bus."

(Suburban, female 55+, children no longer at home, recently relinquished going from two cars to one car)

One participant recognised that their driving habits may be reckless and decided to dispose of a specific high-performance car to protect themselves and those around them.

Environment

The impact of relinquishing a vehicle on the environment was a low priority consideration. This was not a primary reason for relinquishing, but rather an added benefit that came to mind upon reflection.

For those on lower incomes who were relinquishing to save money, the environmental considerations seemed even more abstract. Thinking about the environment was seen as a 'luxury' consideration that only those who are more comfortable financially can think about when choosing whether to keep or dispose of a car.

"I don't really care about climate change. It's shoved down our throats and it's going to happen anyway. They [the government] make everything about finances so I don't have the luxury to care about other things [like climate change]."

(Rural, male 25-34, living alone, recently relinquished going from one car to no cars)

For some, switching to an EV from an ICEV was seen as the 'green move' (rather than reducing the number of cars in a household).

5.2 The process of relinquishing

For participants, giving up a car was generally a long, considered decision. It involved first ensuring it would be viable, then weighing up the trade-offs.

For those relinquishing altogether, participants centred their decision-making around weighing up the benefits associated with having a car against the financial savings and reduced stress associated with not having a car. For those going down from multiple cars this could be just as considered a process as for those relinquishing altogether, or, particularly for those with less pressing financial strain, something that sat at the back of their mind until pushed by something external, such as a prompt from a family member or an offer on the car.

Some consulted family or friends on whether and how to give up their car. Particularly in the case of reducing the number of cars in a household, the decision would be informed by other household members or made jointly. This involved weighing up the needs of different household members and assessing the compatibility of schedules, informing the overall weighing of trade-offs and viability of the decision to relinquish.

"It was a thoughtful decision for me to give up my car... My wife and kids are my committee. I was also thinking of the financial considerations and I'd want to invest the money in other places. I thought about it for a couple of months. I had to consult with my wife and see the condition of the family."

(Urban, male 35-44, children living at home, recently relinquished going from two cars to one car)

Online automotive marketplace/private sales

Online automotive marketplaces were often the first port of call for those relinquishing their cars. Even those who didn't sell their vehicle through these sites still used them to get a free valuation.

Owners of multiple cars and car enthusiasts tended to be most experienced in selling cars and found the process of selling through online automotive marketplaces and online private sales to be straightforward.

Those less familiar with online automotive marketplaces sought advice from YouTube, and friends and family who had experience selling cars online. Specifically, they sought advice on what sort of photos to take and language to use to maximise their chance of getting a good deal.

While there was more time and effort required to sell a vehicle through online automotive marketplaces, participants felt they ultimately got a better price compared with selling their car to a dealership. Younger participants generally felt more comfortable using online automotive marketplaces, describing the process as quick and easy. Selling online, including through more general online marketplaces, was also appealing for a quick sale and to avoid hassle over concerns such as the car not passing an upcoming MOT.

"Lots of experience selling cars so didn't need advice. You go online and it lists all the specs of the cars, you just need to decide how much you're going to charge, it had full MOT history"

(Rural, male 35-44, children living at home, recently relinquished going from four cars to three cars)

Dealership

Others, particularly older participants, tended to sell their cars to/through dealerships. They saw this as the easiest way to sell their vehicle with the least hassle. These participants were aware that they might get less money than through a private sale, but were intimidated by selling online or had bad experiences of doing so in the past. Older participants in particular had sold their cars via dealerships throughout their life, so it felt familiar and easier.

"I went to the dealership and they bought it back. It was a lot easier that way instead of thinking of advertising. It's [selling online] just time and hassle, this was easier."

(Suburban, female 55+, children no longer at home, recently relinquished going from two cars to one car)

Case Study: Tomiola*

(Urban, 55+, one child at home, recently relinquished her car)

Tomiola is a single mother who lives in North London with her daughter.

She recently chose to relinquish her car when her lease ended, as it was a big expense, particularly given the increased cost of living. She also found driving to be very stressful and believed that it was unhealthy to be stuck sitting in traffic every day. Her young daughter is very passionate about climate change and supported her move to relinquish the family car.

Now, Tomi and her daughter get around by using public transport, private taxis or by walking. While public transport is not the most reliable, she still believes that relinquishing her car was a great move:

"I no longer have to sit in traffic. I walk more. That is my main source of exercise. I get 12-14,000 steps a day. I have made my daughter much more healthy. I save money on petrol. I no longer have to have car insurance or road tax or pay the maintenance company. I'm better off financially and health wise."

*Names have been changed to protect anonymity.

5.3 The impact of relinquishing

The impact of relinquishing a car was very different for those who were relinquishing their only car compared to those who were reducing the number of cars they owned/leased. Those without access to any vehicle had to find an alternative for every situation in which they would previously have driven their car. Those who still retained household access to a vehicle were generally less affected by the downsides. Though, these participants still had to invest time to improve their planning and communication with others.

"There hasn't been any drawbacks. But maybe there would have been if I didn't have another car."

(Suburban, female 55+, children no longer at home, recently relinquished)

For those who owned multiple vehicles due to their passion for cars, relinquishing one of their vehicles had a more emotional impact, as they were giving up something they enjoyed rather than needed practically.

Benefits

The benefits of giving up a vehicle broadly aligned with the perceived benefits that motivated participants to relinquish their cars. There generally weren't any 'surprise' benefits to relinquishing a car; those who were motivated by saving money found that they did, and those that were motivated for health reasons found that they were physically and/or mentally healthier.

Some who were apprehensive about relinquishing were surprised by how well and how quickly they had been able to adapt, and surprised that some journeys without a car had been easier than expected.

"I now have money that I would have paid in tax, maintenance and don't pay insurance now either. I'm also not worried about parking spaces when I use public transport too. These are all the things I was considering [before relinquishing]."

(Urban, male 35-44, children living at home, recently relinquished going from two cars to one car)

Drawbacks

The most prevalent drawback that participants experienced was a lack of freedom. As they expected, participants going from two cars to one household car had to adapt by managing their schedules carefully. For the most part they were able to make this work, but occasionally found it frustrating e.g. when they wanted to make more spontaneous journeys or schedules clashed.

"We've gone from two cars to one car, so we've gone from being independent to having to share now. You have to sort of work around each other's schedule more and see who gets the priority. We've made it work, but you just have to make it work really."

(Urban, female 35-44, children living at home, recently relinquished going from two cars to one car)

The change was most challenging for those relinquishing altogether, as they became fully reliant on public transport. Those who were less experienced with public transport found it the hardest to cope with planning and reduced privacy/personal space. Those who were already using public transport regularly (generally those living in London), found the transition much easier. However, while daytime public transport could replace a car, the perceived lack of night-time services reduced the ability of participants to socialise with friends and limited their flexibility.

"I have to wait for buses and taxis. Cars are more direct too. There are also the strikes happening with the trains and you find you can't go to where you want to go. Public transport is not the most reliable."

(Urban, female 55+, children living at home, recently relinquished going from one car to no cars)

The transition was also tougher for those relying on others for lifts outside of household car-sharing. While sharing a lift with co-workers worked most of the time, this rendered participants reliant on that person and on occasion meant they would need to take unfamiliar public transport or even arrive late to work.

Some participants also discussed the impact not having a car had on their sense of pride, reflecting that owning a car, especially a 'nice' car, offers a sense of success and status, and enables owners to help others with lifts or emergencies.

"It was more pride, I felt hurt. The car was a pride thing... It's attachment from when I was younger - that's the car I want to drive. It's about the ownership of something nice and the freedom and choice, the feeling of being able to go anywhere. I felt trapped at first."

(Urban, female 35-44, living alone, recently relinquished going from one car to no cars)

5.4 Future plans

Those who relinquished their vehicles due to financial constraints planned to purchase or lease a vehicle in the future, when they are more comfortable financially. While they were fine without a vehicle in current circumstances, particularly those in London where public transport was felt to be good, they still placed high value on the convenience of having their own car.

"Wanting a car for convenience will never change, that will always be there."

(Urban, female 35-44, living alone, recently relinquished going from one car to no cars)

There was a concern among some however that car ownership will become more expensive in future as congestion charges will require them to buy newer cars or potentially EVs, which were seen to be more expensive upfront. This was particularly true for those in London, with some feeling that if they did get a car again in future, it would likely be an EV to avoid these charges. These participants felt that congestion charges are likely to increase and EVs may become more affordable in the future as the second-hand market increases, so buying an EV could be more cost effective than buying an ICEV and paying congestion charges.

Participants also felt that a change in circumstances could re-introduce a need for a car. London-dwellers felt they would be most likely to purchase/lease a car if they moved out of London due to a new job; living in a more rural area would require them to purchase/lease a car due to the expectation of poor public transport. Those who were sharing a car in their household explained that if their schedules changed, e.g. due to a change in job, this may lead to needing to purchase/lease another car.

"If our schedules were to change, we would probably have difficulty with only one car."

(Urban, female 35-44, children living at home, recently relinquished going from two cars to one car)

Some car enthusiast participants planned to acquire more cars in the future as they regularly buy/lease and sell. For some, there was an emotional connection to the car they relinquished, with regret when they let go of a rare vehicle. In this instance, they planned to purchase that model back at some point in the future.

6. Attitudes towards electric (inc. battery electric and plug-in hybrid) vehicles

Key Findings

- Cost was deemed the key barrier to owning an EV amongst ICEV owners. Participants felt the upfront cost was significantly higher than for ICEVs and that there was a limited number of cheaper second-hand EVs on the market. Cost was a barrier to non-EV owner participants researching EVs further.
- Participants who owned ICEVs expressed a lot of uncertainty around EV ownership. Their concerns focussed on a perceived lack of charging infrastructure, charging time and how long the charge lasts as well as the potential re-sale value of cars given perceived limited battery life.
- Participants could envisage EV ownership increasing in the future and felt they would have greater confidence to switch to an EV as more people in their social circles purchased them.
- The benefits and drawbacks perceived by non-EV owners in the sample were aligned with the experiences of the small number of EV owners in the sample, but the EV owners were happy with their decision to purchase an EV, feeling that the financial benefits outweighed any drawbacks.
- Participants were aware that the government is encouraging uptake of EVs but did not identify specific campaigns, schemes, or initiatives. There was a general sense that it is the government's responsibility to incentivise EV uptake through financial support.

Given changing attitudes around sustainability and the increased take-up of EVs, an important component of this research was to understand the barriers and enablers to EV uptake, the experiences of EV owners and awareness of government and local authority initiatives to increase ownership.

All participants were asked about their attitudes to EVs (including BEVs and PHEVs), irrespective of whether they had direct experience of using these vehicle types. Three research participants owned a BEV, two owned a PHEV, one owned a MHEV and two participants had recently relinquished an MHEV. Therefore, the findings in this section should be treated with some caution because most of the sample may have limited (if any) direct experience of BEVs and PHEVs upon which to base their opinions.

6.1 Barriers and enablers amongst non-EV owners

Cost

Cost was the primary consideration for non-EV owners when considering purchasing EVs. These participants were largely thinking about the upfront cost and saw this as being significantly higher than the upfront cost of ICEVs. For those who did limited research into EVs, seeing the up-front cost of new EVs and the limited number of second hand EVs available put them off looking into EVs as a serious option. Those who did a little more research felt that, as the running costs were lower than ICEVs, they were more open to the idea. Some were sceptical about the running costs of EVs and felt these costs could easily change in the future, particularly in the context of the cost-of-living crisis and their rising electricity bills. A less prevalent perception was that cheaper EVs could be less reliable than more expensive EVs, so buyers need to spend a lot to have greater peace of mind.

"Honestly, I don't know much about electric vehicles other than the fact you save a tonne on petrol."

(Suburban, female 45-54, children living at home, intends to purchase)

Infrastructure

The viability/practicality of day-to-day use of EVs was also a widespread consideration for participants. This centred on concerns mainly about charging infrastructure, with a feeling that there are not enough charging points for many people to own electric cars. This perception was often based on the lack of charging stations that they saw themselves. This fed into range/charge anxiety as they described their fear of having an electric car with nowhere to charge, disrupting their journey, or leaving them stuck somewhere.

"I haven't really heard great things about the charging points. There's not a lot of charging points, and I think it's £6 a day or something to charge the cars."

(Urban, female 25-34, children living at home, intends to purchase)

To a lesser extent, participants were also concerned about the electricity generation and distribution system's ability to cope with the widespread adoption of EVs.

Uncertainty

There was a lot of uncertainty around EVs, with participants often preferring to 'go with what they know' and purchase an ICEV. Participants unfamiliar with EVs had a lot of questions around charging, including how long it takes to charge EVs and how long the charge lasts, the cost of charging and having a charging

point/station installed, and what EV ownership means for insurance and maintenance costs. There were also concerns around battery life with participants worried about losing money if they resold the vehicle in the future, as the battery may need replacing. In contrast, participants felt more confident that ICEVs would hold their value. These uncertainties were particularly off-putting for older participants who were accustomed to years of driving ICEVs and found the idea of trying to understand the new technology unappealing.

"I've never driven an electric vehicle so I don't really have any experiences. I think it depends on the model in terms of you know how many miles you can get on a fully charged battery."

(Urban, male 45-54, children living at home, recently purchased)

Environment

Participants often felt there were environmental benefits to EVs but referred to these benefits in a very general sense. Those who spoke more specifically about the benefits discussed the reduced emissions compared to ICEVs. However, some were more sceptical about the environmental benefits, and felt they were overemphasised by the government and car manufacturers. They felt car manufacturers may push the idea that EVs are environmentally friendly to encourage drivers to purchase more expensive vehicles. There were also concerns about the ethics around the manufacturing of EVs, with reference to news stories about the use of child labour for battery production. Participants with these concerns felt this was something that the government and car manufacturers are downplaying, and this negated any potential environmental benefit. Others were sceptical about the need to respond to climate change at all.

Case study: Sharon* (*Suburban, female 25-34, children living at home, looking to purchase a hybrid vehicle*)

Sharon lives in Wigan on the outskirts of Manchester with her small family. She plans to replace her current ICEV with a hybrid car, in the hope that this will save money (as it should be cheaper to run and will need less repairs). Sharon is also conscious that, of her close friends and family, she is one of the few who still drives a petrol vehicle, and she is keen to keep up with the times and drive a vehicle with newer and more innovative technology. She feels that being more climate friendly is important too.

In her search for a new vehicle, the upfront cost of the car has been a key determinant, more so than the running costs. She has also been considering the implications of charging, such as the length of time it takes to charge and how long the charge lasts. She has been seeking advice from friends and family, as well as doing her own research online to ensure she makes the right decision before she purchases.

"[I] last bought a car in 2021 and my considerations have changed. I'm doing more researching, I'm talking to people more, because I want to be sure I'm making the right choice and getting the best deal. The last time we just saw it and went for it [a car] and it's had a lot of trouble so we want to be sure."

*Names have been changed to protect anonymity.

Comfort and aesthetics

The 'look and feel' of EVs was somewhat polarising. Some had experienced or had heard second hand that EVs are comfortable to drive and quieter than ICEVs, which was appealing. Others were concerned about the quietness of EVs, either because it could be a safety risk as it was harder for pedestrians and other road users to hear them or because they valued the sound and feel of an ICEV engine. Some participants liked the current EV designs and felt they look futuristic and exciting, whereas others preferred more classic designs like ICEVs which they felt are not available yet as EVs.

"They're very quiet and that can be a worry as you don't hear them coming."

(Urban, female 35-44, children living at home, recently purchased)

Those who were passionate about cars were particularly divided, with some excited about trying EVs and having the latest technology, and others preferring

the feel of traditional engines and not wanting to move to a different technology with a different driving experience.

What would need to change to encourage adoption

Participants felt affordability was the main barrier to them buying or leasing an EV. They felt upfront costs of new vehicles needed to be reduced because the current prices felt out of many participants' price ranges. They also pointed to their perception that there is a limited supply of second hand EVs on the market. These barriers tended to prevent participants from doing any further research into EVs. Some felt government subsidies should be in place to facilitate EV adoption, especially given the commitment to reaching Net Zero. Participants didn't offer detail on what these subsidies might look like, instead referring to them in a general sense. Participants also wanted reassurance that they would save money on running costs, as there was some concern that the cost of charging is likely to fluctuate in the future given how energy bills have risen in the past couple of years.

A clear understanding of the investment's worth was also important to participants. This included having a clear(er) roadmap for the UK's transition to EVs. Participants felt that the government (at the time the research was conducted, i.e. in November 2023 to January 2024) did not have a clear strategy on how they plan to transition to EVs, with the target date for the Zero Emission Vehicle (ZEV) mandate⁸ being pushed back from 2030 to 2035 adding to this uncertainty.

Participants also discussed the importance of understanding the resale value of EVs in a second-hand market. Some participants explained that they had heard through word of mouth and through news stories that batteries in EVs only last around 10 years before they need to be replaced, leading to concerns about the resale value. Participants also referenced experiences of the government encouraging people to buy diesel cars, which is now being discouraged.

"I read somewhere that the battery in electric cars only lasts for 10 years and the battery is the most expensive part to replace... If I have to replace the entire car after 10 years, that is not financially stable."

(Urban, female 35-44, children living at home, recently relinquished)

⁸ At the time of this research, the ZEV mandate required 80% of new cars and 70% of new vans sold in Great Britain to be zero emission by 2030, increasing to 100% by 2035. On the 28 September 2023 (around two months before fieldwork for this research started), the government at the time announced that the 100% target would move back from 2030 to 2035.

Participants also wanted reassurance from either the government, car manufacturers, dealerships (and/or friends and family) that charging would not cause them problems. They expressed needing to feel confident that there was adequate infrastructure in place, including enough charge points and sufficient grid capacity, to consider an EV. Regarding the vehicles themselves, they wanted to see improved range per charge and they also wanted to learn from trusted brands about how to plan journeys, charging at home and in public, maintenance, costs, and performance.

"I feel like if they [government] want to be going down that route they need to make people feel like it's viable and that it's actually going to work. I don't think they're showing that they've done enough to make it work for people. If people thought it would work for them they'd feel better about doing it."

(Rural, female 45-54, children living at home, recently purchased)

Some participants explained that they were more likely to purchase an EV for their next car because they will be more commonplace, and this will make them feel more confident in the technology. They observed that only a few years ago, it was very unusual to own an EV and many still didn't know anyone who owns an EV. Being the first to make the switch felt intimidating, particularly for older participants who had driven ICEVs their whole life. Participants felt, however, that this was changing, and predicted that in five years' time EV ownership would be more normalised, encouraging them to switch.

Case study Carol* (Suburban, female 55+, cohabiting, recently relinquished going from two cars to one car)

Carol is an office manager at an opticians and lives in North London. Carol uses her ICEV to drive to work and to her mum's house to give her medication — two journeys that she feels wouldn't be possible without a car. She is an older driver who has always driven ICEVs.

Carol didn't like EVs when she first saw them particularly because she couldn't hear them and you needed a charging station fitted at your house. She had also heard stories about people being stranded after their EV had run out of charge on longer journeys.

Carol has noticed a lot more EVs on the road recently and feels more positive towards them. Knowing people with EVs would make her feel more comfortable about purchasing one because she could ask them for advice.

Carol believes her next car will be an EV and hopes in a few years' time EVs will be even more commonplace. She would like there to be more information available online and at dealerships to help ease the transition, particularly for older drivers.

"I'm excited about changing to electric. There is still a reservation in my mind and I wonder if I'll be OK with it [switching from an ICEV to and EV]. But if a friend/family member had one it'd be easier... And hopefully the place we buy it from, they'd give us some support too, an app or something, to get used to the new way of driving."

*Names have been changed to protect anonymity.

6.2 Experiences of electric (incl. battery electric and plug-in hybrid) vehicle owners

Within the 'recently purchased' cohort, three participants owned a BEV and two owned a PHEV. Within the 'intend to purchase cohort', six participants were, at least to some extent, considering purchasing a BEV and six participants were considering purchasing a PHEV.

Overall, the five participants who owned EVs (BEVs and PHEVs) were positive about making the switch from ICEVs. They found that the running costs were noticeably cheaper, this largely focused on charging costs compared to fuel, though also included reduced VED. They felt the financial advantages outweighed the necessary adaptations, such as taking the time to plan longer journeys to ensure there are charge points on the route. While some owners were conscious about the positive impact on the environment and saw this as a benefit, the amount of money they have saved tended to be the main marker of their view on whether it was the right decision.

"I don't need to stop at the petrol station and spend time filling it up... We have solar panels on the house so our electric bill's very cheap so it doesn't cost a lot to charge the car."

(Rural, female 55+, children living at home, recently purchased an EV)

The EV owners did however highlight similar drawbacks that non-EV owners were concerned about. Charging infrastructure was described as limited in some areas, which was inconvenient, and some reported struggles finding charge points which were compatible with their vehicle plug and/or lead. Those with charge points at home found the adaptation easier to accommodate than those relying on public charge points. However, they also found that the range could be unpredictable, e.g. varying due to the weather, and the range the vehicle claimed to have not always being accurate or consistent, which caused stress and inconvenience.

One of the participants, who described themselves as an owner of a 'budget' BEV, echoed the concerns of non-EV owners that cheaper vehicles were likely to be less reliable with less accurate charge readings and lower range, which could make drivers feel anxious.

"The battery can also lie to you because you can do 5 miles and it will drop by 20 miles but then drive another 5 miles and it won't drop at all. There's definitely some anxiety in having a budget EV."

(Suburban, male 25-34, cohabiting, recently purchased an EV)

6.3 Views on government campaigns

Amongst all participants (both EV and ICEV drivers), there was a general sense that the government is trying to encourage the public to switch to EVs. There was an awareness that there may be financial incentives to do so, especially reduced VED, and disincentives for not doing so, such as charges within low emission zones. There was, however, lower confidence in identifying specific, currently available schemes or incentives to encourage EV uptake. There was also some confusion around the aims and rollout of wider schemes to lower pollution from ICEVs, such as scrappage schemes or clean air zone charges. Some participants felt the congestion charges in London would soon be seen in other cities in the UK, with some aware of plans to bring these to their local city e.g. Bradford and Leeds.

"I live close to Bradford where they are bringing in a policy where you have to pay a fine or toll to enter the city, if you are not an electric car. I don't know the specific details though."

(Rural, female, cohabiting, recently purchased)

Owners of EVs were able to identify more precisely the specific grants for chargers or private cars that used to be in place, with some awareness that support has been reduced in recent years. Participants generally felt that the government should be encouraging and incentivising EV ownership/use more, to get environmental benefits without passing on the full cost directly to consumers.

7. Conclusion

In line with the car ownership evidence review findings,⁹ car purchase and ownership are still largely driven by life circumstances along with a desire for the conveniences offered. While participants found it difficult to clearly articulate specific changes, there was some indication that recent societal trends had, in some cases, impacted their car ownership journey.

Cost of living

The increased cost of living was generally considered a factor impacting decisions, especially for participants who had relinquished a car, but also in budget setting amongst car purchasers. To some extent price increases in the new and second-hand car market impacted reported behaviour. However, it was increases in prices across the economy that participants felt had impacted their available budgets when considering purchase cost, vehicle specification, whether to buy or lease and whether to use the new or second-hand market. This reduced availability of funds aligns with trends noted in the evidence review, particularly increased borrowing and growth in the used car market.¹⁰

Covid-19 pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic was also a factor which some people felt impacted their car ownership journey, largely as it had accelerated a trend to more working from home, thereby leading to less car use. This may also be a contributing factor to changes in car ownership behaviour, as car-sharing within households has become more viable as the need for regular individual car use has reduced.

Moving towards sustainable transport

The introduction of clean air zones was also identified as a factor which shaped participants' purchasing decisions (and could in the future) with it serving as both an incentive and disincentive when selecting a car or choosing to relinquish one. Similarly, when participants were asked to theorise how their views may shift over the next five years, the main change that participants confidently predicted was the move towards lower emission modes of transport, such as EVs, as they become more normalised and more affordable. This aligns with recent trends and forecasts that show a gradual decrease in petrol/diesel purchases and gradual increases in hybrid and EV purchases.¹¹

At the time of the research, however, participants who did not already own an EV generally said they did not intend to purchase EVs themselves. Reasons centred around costs and uncertainties, which may change over time as EV ownership becomes more normalised, affordable, and better understood.

⁹ NatCen. (2024). *Car Ownership: Evidence Review*. Report to the Department for Transport.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

8. Appendices

Appendix one: Methodology

The fieldwork ran from November 2023 to January 2024 and consisted of 40 60-minute depth interviews conducted via Zoom, or telephone for those who did not want a video interview or did not feel digitally confident. Participants were also asked to complete a pre task via MS Forms consisting of three questions to help them recall aspects of buying/leasing, actively considering or relinquishing a car ahead of their interview.

Interview questions were designed to be flexible and open ended to allow participants' own stories and language to emerge. Moderators broadly followed the topic guide(s) to ensure answers to all the key questions and themes. Moderators spent time building rapport with participants and developing an informal tone for the interview so that participants felt comfortable being honest, open, and informal. Care was taken not to impose a need for a rational description of a journey.

Topic guides were also designed with behavioural science in mind. COM-B¹² (capability, opportunity, motivation – behaviour) provided a framework to ensure that all possible influences on behaviour – both conscious and subconscious – were taken into consideration. This consideration at design stage ensured the open questions used in the interview allowed for every possible type of behavioural driver to be surfaced and explored, *if* relevant to the participants.

Appendix two: Analysis

Analysis was conducted using a qualitative thematic approach, with multiple researchers immersing themselves in the data – transcripts organised into a spreadsheet for ease of use – and conducting iterative analysis through brainstorming and storyboarding ahead of reporting.

Appendix three: Sample

Specialist market recruiters were used to gather a sample of 40 participants, using a combination of database and free-find methods. Careful consideration was given to ensure a spread across a wide variety of factors that could influence views and behaviour around car ownership.

The socio-demographics of participants that took part in the research is summarised in the table below:

¹² Michie, S., Atkins, L., & West, R. (2014). The behaviour change wheel. *A guide to designing interventions*. 1st ed. Great Britain: Silverback Publishing, 1003, 1010.

Table 2 Sample breakdown

Category		Sample size
Audience	Bought or leased a car in the last year	15
	Actively looking to buy	15
	Have relinquished	10
Age	18-24	4
	25-34	7
	35-44	11
	45-54	5
	55+	13
Gender	Male	17
	Female	23
	Other	0
Ethnicity	Asian or Asian British	7
	Black, black British, Caribbean, or African	7
	Mixed or multiple ethnic groups	1
	White	25
	Other	0
Life stage	Non child household	12
	Parents of children living at home	19
	Parents of children no longer living at home	4
	Retired (this group will also include non child households, parents of children living at home and parents of children no longer living at home)	5
Disability impacting mobility	Yes	5
	No	35
SEG (Socio-Economic Group)	A/B - Higher & intermediate managerial, administrative, professional occupations	12
	C1/C2 - Supervisory, clerical & junior managerial, administrative, professional occupations or Skilled manual occupations	21

	D/E - Semi-skilled & unskilled manual occupations, Unemployed and lowest grade occupations	7
Location	Urban	21
	Small town/suburban	12
	Village/rural	7
Fuel type (of car owned/ intention to buy)	Petrol/diesel	22
	Electric (battery EV or full electric)	9
	Hybrid (plug-in hybrid EV or self-charging) /mild hybrid EV (petrol/diesel)	9

Appendix four: Considerations

As is the nature of qualitative research, the findings in this report are reflective of what individual participants in the sample said at the time of interview. The interlocking quotas produced a diverse sample, though was difficult to achieve and is not perfectly balanced. Those recruited to take part in the research were not a statistically representative cross-section of car drivers in the UK/England. Consequently, the findings are illustrative and not generalisable to the whole population of the UK/England.

Sub-group differences have been highlighted in this report where a particular view was expressed by most participants in each sub-group, and this was either different from, or a development of, the general view. While the sample size allowed some indicative, comparative analysis, it should be noted that sample sizes that are small cannot be viewed as evidence of sub-group differences in the population. For context, the report provides a sense of whether a view or experience was held by a minority or majority of participants. Again, given the sample size this should not be interpreted as generalisable.

The research is based on the views and perceived behaviours of participants. While care was taken to ensure informality and comfort, participants are still likely to have provided answers that felt both rational and socially acceptable, and they are unlikely to be aware of all the factors driving their behaviours, particularly unconscious ones.