

# Birmingham to become a super-sized low-traffic neighbourhood

## Council plans to divert car traffic from city via a ring road while providing more buses and cycle lines

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Birmingham is the second largest city in the UK and a quarter of the city's car journeys are one mile or shorter, according to city councillors. Photograph: Fabio De Paola/The Guardian

Birmingham has announced what it calls a “transformative” transport plan that will see the car-centric city becoming a super-sized low-traffic neighbourhood. City officials hope that closing roads to through motor traffic, introducing a fleet of zero-emission cross-city buses and building additional protected cycleways will create a more liveable city.

With HS2 infrastructure rising from the ground and Birmingham hosting the Commonwealth Games next year, the Labour-controlled council believes removing through car journeys will be essential for the city to prosper. “We’re one of the original motor cities,” said Birmingham city council’s transport lead, Waseem Zaffar. But like other UK cities, Birmingham suffers from an excess of single occupancy car journeys, he added.

Twenty-five per cent of the city’s car journeys are one mile or shorter, Zaffar said. To convert people to cleaner and healthier forms of transport, the city, including the central area, will be split into seven zones to reduce the dominance of cars, and, rather than driving directly between zones, motorists will be diverted via the A4540 ring road. It also states that the “allocation of road space will change away from

prioritising private cars to support the delivery of public transport and active travel networks fit for a global city". Birmingham will pedestrianise further parts of the city centre and reduce the availability of car parking through the removal of spaces, steeply increased pricing and clamping down on footway parking.

The second largest city in the UK has a population of 1.2 million and an additional 150,000 residents are forecast to arrive within 20 years. The council believes the city must act now to respond to this predicted expansion and tackle the climate emergency. The council also wants to combat poor health, reduce costly congestion and attract more inward investment. "Active travel will become the mode of choice for short trips," promises the plan, which councillors are expected to vote through at a meeting on 12 October.

Businesses and citizens commented on an earlier draft of the transport plan, released in 2020. The final report is just as radical as the original, said Zaffar. "The key principles are the same," he said. "People want these changes". Most businesses supported the proposed workplace parking levy, and residents strongly welcomed the promise of more protected cycleways. "Introducing the blue cycling lanes was probably the most popular thing the council has done in a long time," said Zaffar, who is the Labour councillor for Lozells, one of the city's most deprived areas.

A type 2 diabetic and former petrolhead, Zaffar is a convert to active travel. "You couldn't get me out of my car four years ago," he said. "I would take journeys of less than one mile by car; I hadn't been on a bus since my university days, and I had never cycled until the summer of 2018". Now he cycles, uses the city's Voi e-scooters, and plans to become a regular bus user. "I should also walk more," he said.

Before he became a politician, Zaffar was a trade union representative for Birmingham's taxi drivers, but he now recognises the health downsides of driving for a living. "I often talk to [the city's taxi drivers] about the impact of sitting behind the wheel for long hours and the damage that pollution has on health. This [plan] is about reversing their health inequalities too". For Zaffar, the transport plan is personal. "My father was a taxi driver in Birmingham – in 2009, he suddenly died at the age of 54. Every day I think about the consequences of his job behind the wheel of a car and how that ultimately led to his untimely demise."

Zaffar expects that when building work starts on creating the zones, there will be stiff opposition from some motorists, and he is steeling himself for abuse and threats. But, he said: "I didn't come into politics to win popularity contests; I came into politics to change lives for the better. "I'm the proudest Brummie there is, and this is where my kids will grow up. For the future [the council] has to take some radical, bold and brave steps – the transport plan is one of them."