

E-scooters: What are they good for?

Blog post by Senior Associate Megan Stagman, 7 February 2022

In July 2020, the UK government authorised a series of pilot projects that saw e-scooters proliferate across the country. What had hitherto been a niche and novel technology quickly became commonplace. Yet in spite of their newfound prevalence, the question which policymakers are still asking a year and a half later is: what are e-scooters actually for, and who are they for? At this stage, the government is still yet to present a compelling answer to that question, or to sufficiently reassure sceptics that the technology's roll-out will be safe and fair. Until it does so, the future of e-scooters in Britain remains uncertain.

While the government continues to reserve judgement or meaningful action until its extended trials conclude in November 2022, ministers should recognise the risk of the tide turning against e-scooters. Recent polling [suggests](#) that public attitudes are becoming increasingly hostile, the Metropolitan Police reported hundreds of collisions last year (including multiple fatalities), and Transport for London (TfL) [banned](#) the devices from all public transport in December two months ago due to fire safety concerns. Fears about street clutter, e-scooter muggings and the disproportionate risk to disabled pedestrians all pepper the news headlines on a regular basis. Although the likes of Lime, Tier and Dott are continuing to invest millions into rolling out their technology in the UK, this cannot be without some sense of trepidation given the current mood music.

The situation is not helped by the growing sense amongst road safety advocates, policymakers and the public that police are not enforcing what legislation already exists. Despite the fact that the government's regular reassurances that private e-scooters are illegal on public roads, and local police are fully aware of this, this has arguably not had much bearing on reality. In a House of Lords debate on e-scooters last month, Baroness Stowell of Beeston [relayed](#) her recent experience with a police officer opening a gate to the parliamentary estate to allow a private e-scooter user to exit: "On seeing this, I said to the police officer, "That's illegal; why didn't you stop him?", and the response I received was, "You'd think I could". I said, "You're the police; I think you should". That was the end of the conversation". Her experience chimes with [many others](#), who argue that police enforcement on e-scooters is haphazard at best.

Frustration is also growing around what is seen as a lack of consistency in approach. While e-bikes have an [enforced](#) maximum speed limit, the Dualtron e-scooter proudly advertises its top speed of 68mph. The government would point to the fact that such private e-scooters should not be used on public roads in the first place, and that the (legal) e-scooters that are part of trials have a maximum speed of far more sedate 15.5mph. But when there are an [estimated](#) one million privately owned e-scooters on UK roads, dwarfing the 23,000 legal rentable devices, this is a difficult defence to stand by. Similarly, while motorcyclists are [required](#) by law to wear a helmet that meets the British Safety Standards, users of e-scooters are only recommended to do so. As a result, experts in Bristol [estimate](#) that only 7% of riders are actually using this protection.

All of this contention only makes it all the more important to circle back to the question posed at the beginning of this piece. What, and who, are e-scooters for? Can a convincing case be made for e-scooters' benefits, to counter the increasing calls for a full out ban? Government ministers have [suggested](#) that they expect the modal shift to e-scooters to be around 15-20% from journeys that would otherwise be taken in cars; this figure is backed up by TIER research that [found](#) 17.3% of rides on their scooters replaced car journeys. Such a transition can obviously be defended on numerous fronts, including increased safety, environmental benefits, and ameliorated congestion. But this becomes less politically tenable when one looks at the rest of the data. After all, the government [expects](#) around 70% of e-scooter journeys to be replacing walking, public transport and cycling - all of which are arguably safer and more environmentally friendly than even e-scooters.

If e-scooters are to be a success in the UK, the government will need to convince stakeholders across parliament and industry that there is a public good justification to e-scooters, beyond the UK's general desire to be 'world-leading' in all respects post-Brexit. There are legitimate arguments that can be deployed to defend e-scooters if done correctly - in terms of sustainability, convenience, traffic management and economic growth, to name a few. These are even more likely to be accepted in the context of a framework that undergoes targeted changes to bolster rules and enforcement, and address the elephant in the room around legal status.

But with growing cynicism from all corners, the government cannot wait much longer before throwing its weight behind this, assuming that there is indeed political will to make e-scooters a success. Many of the UK's neighbours are now erring on the side of restricting the technology, due to declining public support. Last month, Stockholm demanded that the number of e-scooters in the city is halved from its current number, with the [support](#) of local citizens who are 57% negative about the technology.

If ongoing trials and unending consultations continue in the UK at the expense of clear policy mechanisms to reassure citizens and address real concerns, then the British government may find itself too late to reap the benefits.