Submission to the Climate Change Commission

March 2021

Purpose

We support the targets set out by the government, regarding net zero emissions of long-lived gases by 2050, and we are encouraged that the emissions budgets set out by the Climate Change Commission represent a way to achieve this. We do not have the expertise to comment on the broad spectrum of recommendations made by the commission. We wish to focus our comments on the implications for transport emissions. Transport currently contributes about 37% of long-lived gases.

The purpose of this short submission is to advocate for the reduction of Vehicle Kilometers Traveled (VKT) as a key climate change measure that should be emphasised in all policies and planning for reaching our targets, and to reinforce that low-traffic neighbourhoods are an effective and low cost way to achieve this. We note that there are small and straightforward legislative changes which would make low traffic neighbourhoods much easier to implement at local government level.

Background

During 2020, the Helen Clark Foundation conducted some research into the climate, health and wellbeing impacts of our reliance on cars for transport. The full report is available here.

There are many reasons to make reducing traffic volumes in our cities an urgent priority. Aotearoa has one of the highest rates of car ownership in the OECD, and we spend most of our travel time in cars. But our collective reliance on cars comes at considerable cost. As your advice notes, the transport sector accounts for almost a quarter of our carbon emissions, and more than half of these come from private vehicles.

There are impacts beyond climate too, and we encourage the climate commission to view the problem holistically.

Aotearoa has also committed to another zero target: zero road deaths (with an interim goal of halving the road toll in 10 years). Yet on average, one person is killed on our roads every day, and another is injured every hour. The more we drive, the more we crash, at exponential rates.

Excess traffic contributes to a lack of social connectedness in our cities, by isolating us in our cars and discouraging us from spending time on the street.

Making our streets into places where it's easy to walk and wheel and there is space to play, talk, and connect can help combat loneliness and build community – more important than ever in the post-pandemic context.

For all these reasons, Aotearoa would benefit from a substantial reduction in traffic volumes in our cities: fewer people driving fewer cars, less often.

Our investigation generated public policy recommendations for how this can be better achieved. Low traffic neighbourhoods emerged as a key strategy which would contribute to meeting all of these goals – they are cheap, effective and could be easily enabled by some minor changes to legislation.

About The Helen Clark Foundation

The Helen Clark Foundation is an independent public policy think tank based at AUT University.

Building on the lifetime of public service by our patron Helen Clark, we aim to contribute to policy debates on how to achieve a more inclusive, sustainable, and fair society. We are non-partisan.

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Why reducing VKT is important

We need policies that can secure change at scale

Policy discussions about traffic reduction, when they happen at all, tend to frame the issue as one of personal choice, and leave it up to motivated individuals to pursue alternatives to driving if they feel strongly enough about it. But leaving it up to individuals to change their transport patterns in a social and physical environment that is often hostile to alternatives will never be enough to make traction on the important climate, road safety, and social wellbeing targets we have set for ourselves as a nation. Rather, we need to adopt policies that can secure the change required at scale, in ways that enhance people's daily lives and improve their transport experiences. Rapidly accelerating the implementation of low-traffic streets and neighbourhoods in Aotearoa's cities is one important way to do this.

The Helen Clark Foundation understands and supports the commission's intention to establish an integrated national transport network to reduce travel by private car. We agree that there needs to be much more walking, cycling and use of public and shared transport. Our recent research has not specifically explored frameworks for expanding the use of electric cars, so we will not comment on that element of the consultation, other than to say that the priority must remain to reduce travel in private cars as a primary focus, then to electrify the parts of the fleet which remain. We also note that it will be important that this transport network is positively framed – as the presence of something, not the absence of something – and culturally appropriate for Aotearoa New Zealand.

However the commission chooses to word it, this positively-framed vision for transport will need to include concepts of whanaungatanga, belonging, and connection. People are social beings: we evolved to live communally, and our brains are wired to respond to social isolation as an existential threat. The notion that people rely on strong, meaningful social connections for our mental health and wellbeing is widely supported by evidence as well as common experience (for a thorough review, see Hawkley and Cacioppo 2010). The way we design our transport environment allowing for social connections to thrive is a key element of ensuring communities lower their emissions while improving their wellbeing. If changes made enhance people's daily lives, it facilitates political buy in for the necessary changes we must make to lower emissions.

What is a low traffic neighbourhood?

A low-traffic neighbourhood is a group of residential streets where through-traffic is discouraged.

Instead, buses, trucks, and other vehicles driven by non-residents travelling through the neighbourhood stick to identified main roads which border the low-traffic area. People who live inside the low-traffic neighbourhood can drive directly to and from their home, arrange deliveries, and be accessed by emergency services, but non-residential traffic is discouraged. There are a number of different ways this can be achieved.

Often it will involve the creative deployment of wider footpaths, bollards, planting, and traffic calming measures to slow traffic down, direct drivers onto main through roads, and encourage residents to make greater use of alternative modes such as walking, wheeling, or cycling for short local trips.

For this to work, the low-traffic area needs to be quite small; ideally, residents should be able to walk or wheel from one side to the other in less than 15 minutes. This equates to roughly one square kilometre. Low-traffic neighbourhoods are also most effective if they are part of an integrated, city-wide plan and network of connected low-traffic areas, so that people can cross easily between neighbourhoods to access key destinations, and in order to keep main arterial routes safe for all.

A similar approach can also be adopted for non-residential areas, usually inner-city retail and hospitality precincts. The current proposal to pedestrianise parts of the 'Golden Mile' from Lambton Quay to Courtenay Place in Te Whanganui-a-Tara (Wellington) is an example of taking a low-traffic approach to a non-residential area.

When well planned and executed, low-traffic streets and neighbourhoods can dramatically reduce traffic volumes, not only in the streets inside the low-traffic neighbourhood, but also in the surrounding residential area.

This is known as "traffic evaporation": when large numbers of people switch to alternative modes such as walking and wheeling to make short journeys they previously would have undertaken by car (the school run, for example). Low-traffic neighbourhoods have also been shown to improve air quality, increase physical activity, and benefit local business.

A critical factor in the success of low-traffic neighbourhoods is the depth of community engagement in the design, execution, and evaluation of the changes.

Regulatory and legislative barriers

Some easy changes could make low traffic neighbourhoods much simpler for local governments to implement

The legal framework governing council decision-making poses some challenges that can make the pursuit of low-traffic interventions particularly difficult. For example, common traffic-reducing measures deployed in low-traffic neighbourhoods such as new bollards, planters, or one-way restrictions, while still allowing cars to access the street, may legally be considered road closures because of the way they change how vehicles can navigate the street. While most of the Local Government Act 1974 has been repealed and replaced with the 2002 legislation, its requirements related to road closures are still in force. These requirements allow councils to impose only temporary road closures, thus restricting their ability to make low-traffic neighbourhoods permanent. The 1974 provisions also impose particularly rigid notification and consultation requirements for the 'stopping of roads and temporary prohibition of traffic', including that roads may not be closed if doing so would 'impede traffic unreasonably,' which may have the effect of discouraging some councils from pursuing low-traffic streets and neighbourhoods in their areas.

In the UK, similar challenges have been overcome with the creation of a specific regulatory tool to encourage the development of low-traffic streets and neighbourhoods and other tactical urbanism projects. Experimental Traffic Orders enable councils to trial traffic changes for a period of 18 months, without the need for prior consultation; rather, the experiment itself is the consultation.

For the first six months of the experimental order, suggested improvements and objections must be considered and changes can be made; within eighteen months a decision must be made about whether the order becomes permanent. No decision means the rules revert to what they were previously.

Experimental Traffic Orders have the advantage of enabling nimble, innovative projects whose effects can be tested on the ground and adjusted in real time, rather than trying to anticipate all possible outcomes as part of the consent process. The fact that they allow change to proceed "without consultation" should not be interpreted as meaning that consultation does not occur or is not critical to the success of the projects; rather, ongoing consultation and engagement occurs throughout the life of the project and is part of the experimental process.

Conclusion

A positively-framed vision of a low emissions transport network will need to be a key plank of the strategy recommended by the Climate Change Commission. While it is important that this vision is defined and described positively – as the presence of something, not the absence of something – VKT will provide a useful way to measure how well this positive vision is being achieved. For these reasons, The Helen Clark Foundation recommends that a focus on tracking and reducing VKT over time becomes a key focus in the final advice to government from the Climate Change Commission. We also recommend that legislation allowing for low traffic neighbourhoods to be implemented be picked up as an immediate priority.

We would be happy to present in person on this advice, please see contact details for Deputy Director Holly Walker on the first page.

References

The Shared Path, The Helen Clark Foundation, 2020: https://helenclark.foundation/the-shared-path

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'Vision Zero, Meet VKT Reductions', Todd Litman, Victoria Transport Policy Institute (Canada): https://www.planetizen.com/blogs/108401-vision-zero-meet-vmt-reductions

Experimental Traffic Order Fact Sheet (UK): https://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/media/6687/explaination_of_experimental_traffic_orders-36785.pdf