Exploring Public Opposition to Active Travel Planning in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown

SYNTHESIS REPORT

May 2023

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This document acts as a synthesis report of the research conducted that explores public opposition to active travel projects. A much longer and detailed report is available upon request (eganr5@tcd.ie).

1. Study Background

Ireland needs to halve its transport sector emissions by 2030 to meet international decarbonisation targets (Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, 2022). In light of nearly three-quarters of journeys in Ireland being undertaken via private car (Central Statistics Office, 2020), modal shift from private car use to active travel and public transport is one of the major planned strategies for reaching this goal (Department of Transport, 2022). In order to facilitate mass modal shift, goals to incorporate changes to the built environment that favour active travel users have been incorporated into Irish policies. These goals include the development of dedicated cycling and walking infrastructural networks (Department of Transport, 2022). In a recent report by the OECD (2022) that critically evaluated the Irish transport system and national policies to decarbonise the transport sector, the authors advocated for policies with transformative potential. In particular, they argued for the importance of not only active travel spatial provision but more ambitious road space reallocation that favours active travel modes and public transport. This transformative orientation is reflected in the revised Climate Action Plan (Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, 2022), in which the 'Shift' strategy is argued to involve interventions that reduce the accessibility provided by driving relative to active travel and public transport. Road space reallocation along with broader car 'demand management' measures are discussed as measures that can help to realise this shift.

On the basis of this wider policy context and existing objectives in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown to increase modal shift from the private car to active travel modes (Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council, 2010; Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council, 2022), research was undertaken to explore how a dominant car system is politically sustained in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown. In particular, a Critical Discourse Analysis of 150 public consultation submissions opposing redistributive active travel measures proposed in the major 'Active School Travel' scheme was implemented (Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council, 2020c). Importantly, with this scheme, the council proposed redistributive – as opposed to additive – active travel measures, such as segregated cycle infrastructures to replace mixed-traffic road spaces, lowered speed limits, and car access restrictions (Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council, 2020). Some of these proposed measures garnered considerable opposition through the medium of public consultation (Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council and Ramboll, 2020), but also within the county council chamber and through collective protest (O'Sullivan, 2021). This resembles wider opposition to redistributive cycleways in both Dublin (Halpin, 2021) and Galway (Burke, 2022). On this basis, our study was carried out with two objectives in mind: i) to explore how redistributive active travel measures are publicly perceived and socially constructed, and ii) to inform how new narratives may be formed through understanding the discourses that might continually 'lock-in' (Urry, 2004) mobility practices and transport planning practices that favour private car use. This interest in generating new narratives of transport planning and mobility is in keeping with both the recommendations of the OECD (2022) report and the revised Climate Action Plan (Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, 2022).

2. (Car-Centric) Technical Discourse of Transport Planning

The most dominant and prevalent discourse uncovered in the analysis was the 'technical discourse of transport planning'. Such a discourse and its effects in sustaining the dominance of car-based automobility are well-documented across a variety of studies in transport and mobilities research (Aldred, 2019; Bonham, 2006; Bonham & Cox 2010; Caimotto, 2019; Van Der Meulen & Mukhtar-Landgren, 2021). This discourse legitimises and promotes planning practices that privilege car-based mobilities and sustains or expands the spaces of automobility. Relatedly, this discourse undermines planning practices that might challenge the dominance of a car system. In this respect, such a

discourse can be contrasted with alternative discourses of transport planning that do not normatively favour automobility (i.e., that are not 'car-centric') but instead prioritise public transport, walking and cycling mobility, such as the sustainable mobility paradigm (Banister, 2008). There were several main features of this discourse identified there were significantly drawn upon in opposition to redistributive active travel measures:

i. 'Traffic' as Car-Based (Im)Mobility: 'traffic' was found to be keyword across the discourse samples and was predominantly set up to mean car-based mobility (e.g. facilitate 'traffic'), or car-based immobility (e.g., cause 'traffic'). Cycle mobilities/cyclists were largely excluded as forms of 'traffic'.

ii. 'Roads' as 'Traffic' Spaces: 'road' was another keyword across the discourse sample, which was mainly set up as the space of 'traffic'. Cycleways were almost unanimously excluded as spaces that can or do facilitate 'traffic'. Likewise, cycle spaces were frequently excluded as elements of a transport 'system', through wordings of reallocation measures as creating "one-way systems".

iii. 'Traffic' as an Immutable Substance: 'traffic' – i.e., car-based (im)mobility – was constructed in many cases metaphorically as an immutable (i.e., unchangeable) substance rather than a collective mobility practice. This substance may 'flow' and 'congest' through a transport 'network' of finite 'capacity'. This construction and interpretation of car-based (im)mobility assumes that modal shift does not occur and is not possible and, relatedly, that car-based mobility cannot be reduced and will instead necessarily be 'diverted' with redistributive active travel measures.

iv. Active Travel Measures Cause 'Traffic', Danger & Emissions: on the basis that cycle mobility is not 'traffic', that cycle spaces do not facilitate 'traffic', and that 'traffic' cannot be reduced or changed, redistributive active travel measures were widely depicted or assumed to be causes of 'traffic' (car-based immobility) and/or 'traffic' diversion (car-based mobility on other, less-capacious, roads). This 'traffic', construed as caused by active travel measures, in turn was depicted as causing danger to cyclists, pedestrians and drivers as well as increasing emissions/local air pollution through causing longer journey durations and distances by car.

v. Traffic Demand-Led Planning: a value-based assumption that transport planning should proceed on the basis of meeting 'traffic demand' was drawn upon across the discourse sample. Since 'traffic' was primarily set up as car-based (im)mobility in this discourse and 'roads' were set up as the only spaces of 'traffic', planning for cycling was predominantly depicted as a practice that was only acceptable provided it did not impinge on car-based mobility and, relatedly, road spaces – i.e., that it does not disrupt the 'traffic'/transport system. In the instances when cycle mobility was constructed as 'traffic', this was used in order to oppose the maintenance or development of cycle spaces on the basis of insufficient 'demand'. Roads with low volumes of car-based mobility, on the other hand, were positively depicted as 'quiet'.

3. (Car-Centric) Discourse of Everyday Mobility

The second major discourse identified in opposition to redistributive active travel measures was the (car-centric) discourse of everyday mobility. The technical discourse of transport planning positively represents planning practices that favour the continued (or expanded) dominance of car-based automobility while undermining planning that challenges this privileged position of automobility. The car-centric discourse of everyday mobility construes driving and drivers as favourable in terms of societal importance while relatively dismissing the significance of cycling and cyclists. In this way, this discourse symbiotically interacts with a car-centric technical discourse of transport planning. Outlined below are the key features of this discourse drawn upon in active travel measure opposition:

i. Driving as Essential: this discourse constructs driving as *the* essential mobility practice for engaging in everyday activities. This is achieved in part through wording driving as a "need", as "mobility" and

movement in general, and as the provider of "access". The implication of this construal of driving is that it ought to be prioritised as a form of mobility in planning measures.

ii. Cycling as Recreational: relative to driving, cycling is represented as a mobility practice of marginal significance for everyday activities both at present and in the future. One way this is achieved is through a construal of cycling primarily as a recreational activity – which is by definition non-essential activity. This is reflected in wordings of cycling as something that people "want to" or "like to" engage in rather than "need to" or "have to", like driving. It is also explicitly worded as a "leisure" activity, while dedicated cycle spaces are constructed as places of recreation and physical activity rather than transport.

iii. Cycling as Conditional: cycling is also represented as marginally significant relative to driving through a negative construal of its "feasibility" as a means of engaging in everyday mobility. It is construed as only "feasible" for particular everyday tasks (i.e., mobility that does not involve the travelling with others and/or carrying goods) in particular conditions (i.e., bright, flat, warm and dry conditions), thereby greatly limiting its possibility for everyday mobility practices relative to driving. In this way, it is depicted as conditional relative to driving, which is (often implicitly) constructed as practical for nearly all everyday tasks that involve mobility in all natural, social and built environmental conditions.

4. Origins

The *technical discourse of transport planning* can be seen to be socially determined by a long legacy in national and local authority policy in Ireland and beyond that has prioritised planning for the private car and motor vehicles at large. The Design Manual of Urban Roads and Streets (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2019) highlights how the primacy of enabling efficient 'traffic' flow and reducing traffic congestion, in part through segregating private cars from people walking and cycling, was advanced and integrated into official visions for transport and urban planning in Ireland from the 60's. The beginning of car-centric urban planning for Dublin is illustrated by Hanna (2015), in which cyclists – who made up nearly 30% of journeys in 1961 traffic counts for Dublin city and Dún Laoghaire – were effectively planned out of the city in favour of a vision of universal car ownership and use. This vision was characterised by plans for urban sprawl, one-way city centre roads and a motorway surrounding the urban core. In these visions, existing cycling practices were entirely disregarded: cyclists did not count as 'traffic'.

The *discourse of everyday mobility*, on the other hand, may be seen as shaped by 'everyday practices' (Haas, 2020) that are now predominantly undertaken with and through the car in Ireland (Central Statistics Office, 2020). These practices have been shaped by the aforementioned histories of planning for the car as the universal mode of citizen mobility in Ireland (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2019; Hanna, 2015). This discourse reproduces meanings of the car as a requirement for the completion of everyday tasks ('driving as a "need"') and also as the facilitator of mobility ('driving as mobility') and personal freedom ('active travel measures as incarceration') that are argued by Sheller and Urry (2000) to be fundamental to automobility, which "coerces people into an intense flexibility" (p. 744). Representation of cycling as recreational and conditional may be seen to be in part a by-product of the observable centralisation of driving in everyday mobility practices and the built environment, in addition to the mass advertising of the car as a symbol of personal freedom and basic mobility (Haas, 2020). Such advertising by the car industry prominently features in Irish state-sponsored media (e.g., Renault, 2023). Relatedly, in many policy representations of cycling, cycling is frequently justified and encouraged as a mode of travel in terms of its benefits for health and the environment (e.g., Department of Transport, 2022; Smarter Travel, 2009), rather than being represented as a taken-for-granted, practical transport mode for everyday journeys.

5. Effects

The technical discourse of transport planning can be seen to reproduce planning practices that favour car-based mobility and marginalise active travel through protecting spaces and mobility regulations relating to speed and access that favour private car use. The discourse of everyday mobility, on the hand, can be seen to reproduce car-based mobility as the essential and basic everyday mobility practice, while distancing cycling from such a possible meaning. This naturalisation of driving as essential and cycling as recreational and/or conditional provides a foundation for car-based mobility (i.e. 'traffic') as a practice that is at the very least static in terms of its 'demand'. Driving is construed as a practice that cannot be changed – or at the least that cannot be reduced (i.e., it is an 'immutable' phenomenon). The current and future 'demand' for cycling, on the other hand, is discounted, since this is naturalised as primarily a recreational and/or conditional mobility practice, while also being construed as 'traffic' seemingly only in instances when there is perceived evidence of low 'demand' (see 'demand-led planning' in findings). When there is what could be called high 'demand', however, it appears that cycle mobility is more likely to be represented as a 'danger' (see 'active travel measures cause danger' in findings). In this symbiotic fashion, these discourses normatively support the dominance of a car system in DLR, chiefly through naturalising driving as essential within a discourse of everyday mobility and disregarding cycling as traffic within a technical discourse of transport planning.

6. Recommendations

The findings propose several suggestions for the communication of redistributive active travel measures based on our analysis of discourses that may politically sustain the dominance of a private car system in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown and potentially other Irish contexts.

i. Cycle Mobility as Traffic: Wording cycle mobility/cycling/cyclists as "cycle traffic" (Groot, 2016; Parkin, 2018). Through wording cycle mobility as "cycle traffic" in future proposals and public communications, cycling and cyclists could be legitimised as a form of traffic as opposed to something 'in the way' of traffic (see Aldred & Jungnickel, 2013). Likewise, through using a standardised wording of cycle mobility as "cycle traffic", cycle spaces could be set up as elements of a traffic/transport system rather than spaces that necessarily reduce or disrupt a traffic/transport system. Lastly, avoiding the use of 'traffic' as a general term and instead systematically using "cycle/car/motor/pedestrian/mixed traffic" can help to more transparently present any claims regarding 'traffic' in relation to the mode in question.

ii. Traffic as a Malleable Substance - A Metaphor of Conversion: Within the technical discourse identified, the possibility of modal shift as well as reduced mobility practices (see 'Avoid', Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, 2022) is absent. This absence of possibility is incorporated into the metaphorical rendering of traffic as an 'immutable substance'. On the basis that modal shift can be stimulated through active travel measures, a counter-metaphor of 'traffic conversion' could be incorporated into an alternative transport planning discourse to contest working assumptions within the car-centric technical discourse of transport planning that car-based mobility ('traffic') is an immutable substance that must be diverted elsewhere with redistributive active travel measures.

iii. Car-Centric Planning as a Cause of Danger and Emissions: It is well established that car-based automobility has contributed to mass road traffic violence (Braun & Randell, 2022) and unsustainable transport sector emissions brought about in part by the disintegrated practice of spatial planning and public transport planning (Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, 2022; OECD, 2022). One possibility for addressing a construction of active travel measures as a primary cause of local danger and emissions may be measuring, quantifying, and publicly communicating the system-

level (and local) effects that car-centric planning may have on the safety for people cycling and walking, as well as local air pollution (e.g., Smart Dublin, 2021; Technological University Dublin, 2022).

iv. Vision-Led Planning: Based on the recent Greater Dublin Area Transport Strategy, official planning practice is moving towards a 'decide and provide' approach where planning decisions are made on the basis of what is desired – such as increased cycling and walking and less driving – rather than what is forecast (National Transport Authority, 2021). In light of the evidence that an underlying principle of demand-led planning acts as a major normative basis for redistributive active travel planning opposition in DLR, explicit representations of a more 'vision-led' approach that does not necessitate the reproduction of the current mobility regime (Lyons & Davidson, 2016), along with clear explanations of why such an approach is needed as an alternative to 'predict and provide' might be beneficial.

v. Driving as Unsustainable: While the discourse of everyday mobility construes driving as the essential mobility practice for everyday life, a discourse that decentres the car as the basic mode might emphasise the car as fundamentally unsustainable as the primary form of everyday mobility in urban contexts – particularly in relation to population growth and policy aims for more compact urban development in Ireland (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2021). This would shift emphasis away from driving as essential toward adapting the transport system to enable alternative forms of everyday mobility as essential, including through demand management measures. On these grounds, sustainability could be argued in relation to *sustaining everyday life* and the personal and group mobility this may involve, rather than arguing on the basis of ecological sustainability.

vi. Driving as Conditional: As a counter-representation to a construal of cycling as conditional, the dependencies that are incorporated into (and often met) in the practice of driving can be represented in an everyday mobility discourse that decentres the car. This could involve, among other things, a representation of how driving as a practice is extensively dependent on a vast system of automobility (OECD, 2022; Urry, 2004). This might include depictions of how driving is dependent on the provision of extensive spatial provision for driving and car parking, major state roads investment and maintenance, driver licencing, car insurance, car ownership, road traffic policing, road safety campaigning, access to affordable fuel, and the widespread availability of fuelling stations. Proposal and policy images of driving could also reflect what peak car traffic looks like in urban and suburban locations, which can often be congested.

vii. Cycling as Practical: Cycling can be used to complete for a variety of everyday tasks (Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, 2020) under a variety of conditions (Hudde, 2023). It is proposed that a counter-construal to cycling as conditional could be the representation (including through imagery) of cycling as an all-purpose, all-weather, all-day activity. Focusing on cycling as practical for all-purposes, this could involve the inclusion of images of people cycle-shopping and cycling-chauffeuring (e.g., as a group or with a cargo bike for utilitarian journeys). Portraying cycling as an all-weather and all-day mode, on other hand, could involve the inclusion of representations of cycling in the rain, in overcast conditions, and cycling at night. All of these representations could arguably challenge the construal of cycling as a mobility practice that is fundamentally limited to a small variety of journeys (e.g., individual commute journeys) within a restrictive set of conditions (e.g., warm, dry and bright weather).

7. Conclusion

This research makes several recommendations that might be considered in refining the discourse drawn upon in the development and public communication of redistributive active travel planning proposals and policies. The findings of this study could also more simply – and perhaps more significantly – be used to identify patterns of oppositional discourse relating to pro-cycling and walking planning that challenges the prioritisation of car use. Through identifying how the features of these

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discourses are drawn upon in opposition to redistributive active travel measures, more transparent public debate and deliberation may be facilitated, particularly with respect to the effects that these discourses have on politically sustaining the dominance of a car system in DLR and most likely across other regions of Ireland in light of pressing carbon emission reduction targets.

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