Decarbonisation of transport

focus groups and survey summary of findings

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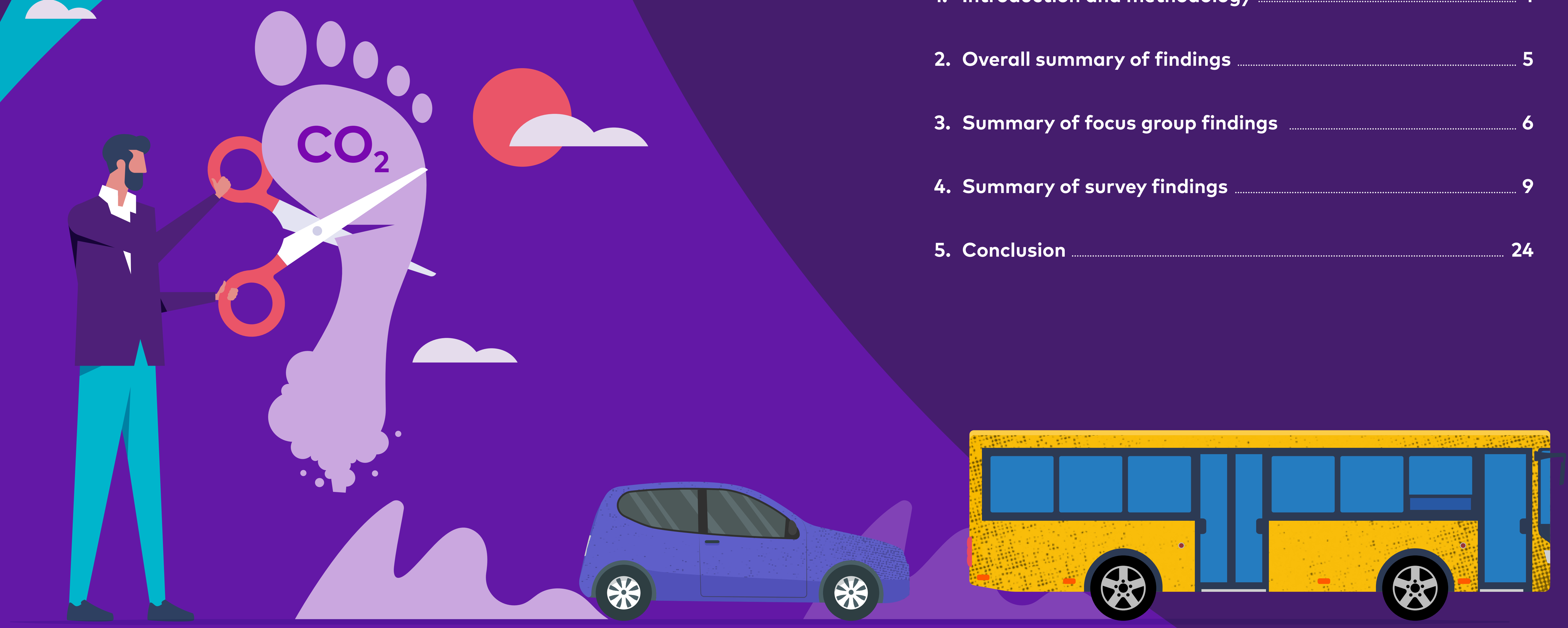

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1. Introduction and methodology

1.1 The Consumer Council as a non-departmental public body (NDPD) has a statutory duty to promote and safeguard the interests of consumers in Northern Ireland.

1.2 The UK Government has developed a transport decarbonisation plan that will seek to deliver zero emissions from road transport by 2040. Northern Ireland must contribute to UK commitments to decarbonise the road transport sector.

1.3 In November 2022, the Consumer Council commissioned Social Market Research (SMR) to undertake focus groups and a consumer survey on issues relating to decarbonisation and transport. The aim of the research was to develop an understanding of consumers' views and priorities on the decarbonisation of transport, the changes they may be asked to make and the policy interventions that aim to change how they travel in the future.

1.4 The research was based on two complementary elements: seven focus groups with 56 consumers; and a quantitative survey of 1,034 consumers. Both elements used a representative sample of Northern Ireland consumers. The detailed methodology is contained in the full research reports.

2. Overall summary of findings

2.1 This research shows that the car continues to be the dominant mode of travel in Northern Ireland and many rely on it. Despite this a significant number of consumers are starting to think about, plan for or have already started using public transport for the first time. However, there are a range of actual and perceived barriers to greater use of public transport, notably poor service availability and frequency (particularly in rural areas), and cost. The general consumer sentiment is that it will be difficult to reduce their use of private cars and increase their use of public transport, particularly for complex journeys as they require flexible options. This presents a challenge for public transport to integrate its services with other modes of travel.

2.2 Consumers are aware of the need for transport to reduce its overall carbon emissions and they support measures such as traffic calming schemes and the promotion of cycling. However, whilst most consumers believe that investment in public transport in Northern Ireland is a priority, only a minority are willing to pay to reduce emissions from road transport through measures such as increasing tax on petrol or diesel cars, increasing the cost of carparking or introducing congestion charging in towns and cities.

2.3 The common view is that where there are costs to be borne for reducing emissions, either the current users of road transport in Northern Ireland, or the beneficiaries of new interventions to reduce emissions from road transport, should pay. Added to this is the view that increasing the cost of carparking and discouraging consumers from bringing cars into towns and cities will negatively impact on businesses. Only a minority of businesses believe that current public transport is good enough to be a viable alternative.

2.4 This indicates that there is work to be done to move consumers from aspiring to be greener in their transport choices to be willing to pay for new ways of travelling or sacrifice the convenience and practicalities of the private car.

3. Summary of focus group findings

3.1 Consumers generally agree that there is a need to reduce congestion and to reduce carbon emissions in towns and cities. Transferring their journeys to public transport is the obvious answer for them, but many say that comfort, convenience, timetabling and safety need to be improved before they would consider using it instead of their cars. People with families who travel with buggies do not see buses as a viable alternative, and those whose journeys are complicated say that using public transport to get from A to B via C and D would be challenging.

> "I would have to calculate if it would be cheaper to take the kids in the car and pay for car park or if it would be cheaper to go on public transport. Add in the convenience of the car and you need to make public transport a lot cheaper for us to be tempted."
>
> "We need to fix all the other things that are wrong first. I have free public transport, I don't use it more often than before, the service is still poor, so making it free doesn't really make any difference. Free, but poor quality is not necessarily attractive."
>
> "Because the way Belfast is constructed, you have to get a bus in and a bus out again, so a journey that would be 30mins by car can take two hours. We need (additional) smaller buses that cross the city instead everything going in and out of the centre."

3.2 The complexity of people's journeys is an issue that came up repeatedly in the focus groups. Consumers thought that planners need to take into account that most journeys are not straightforward. Furthermore, many people want to travel across town or across their city and taking a train or bus into the centre and back out again is inconvenient and costly.

> "People have to make multiple trips; go to work, leave kids to school, do shopping and so on. We are not just taking a trip from A to B, we are going via Y and Z on the way."
>
> "If you are making a straightforward A to B trip or normal nine to five commuting, public transport should be made a viable alternative, but it needs to be cleaner, greener, cheaper and on time."

3.3 There are some consumers who say that the convenience of using their car will always trump other forms of transport. These consumers are likely to pay congestion charges and not change their private car usage. If money is raised from congestion charging, there is a strong view amongst consumers that it should be kept within Northern Ireland and used to improve public transport.

> "We would probably just incorporate congestion charges into our daily expenses and still take the car."
>
> "Don't take away our choice by banning things. To discourage us from driving by bringing in a congestion charge is fine but make it affordable and then we can decide to pay or not."
>
> "If it goes into a central pot who knows where it ends up, it needs to be kept aside for cheaper and more frequent transport."

3.4 Consumers said that, whilst congestion charging and restriction on parking might decrease the number of cars in towns and cities, it could have a negative impact on business and commerce.

> "Fewer cars will mean fewer emissions, but could mean that fewer people go into town, the footfall lowers and there is a negative impact on business and retail in particular."

3.5 Cycling was viewed by members of the focus groups as being a leisure activity. They thought that it would be a good idea to separate cycle lanes from cars and from pedestrians but did not think this would necessarily encourage commuting by cycle.

> "Are there enough cyclists to warrant narrow lanes for cars or improved cycle lanes? I am not so sure."

3.6 Park and Ride is seen by focus group participants to be the easiest way to reduce the number of cars going into towns and cities, with cheap and environmentally friendly shuttle services operating into and back out of the centre. However, security and lighting need to be improved at some Park and Ride schemes and they need to stay open late with shuttle buses continuing to run at night.

> "We don't have park and ride in Enniskillen or Omagh to get into the towns, but they'd be a great idea."
>
> "Park and Ride should be available for car share as well. We could meet up there and just take one car into the town."

3.7 There was support for the pedestrianisation of town and city centres. Some saw this as a move towards repurposing the centres of town and cities, making them primarily places of leisure and entertainment.

> "There are a lot of advantages to pedestrianisation, changing the nature of towns and cities for the better, cafes and restaurant spilling out onto the pavement and road."

4. Summary of survey findings

4.1 Alternatives to the private diesel/petrol vehicle

This survey shows that NI consumers continue to have a high reliance on petrol and diesel cars, with relatively few using or having access to electric or hybrid vehicles. However, whilst the car continues to be the dominant mode of travel in Northern Ireland, a significant number of consumers are starting to think about, plan for or have already started using public transport for the first time.

71% of consumers say they most often use a car to get about (walking, 19%: bus, 8%: cycle, 1%: train, 1%).

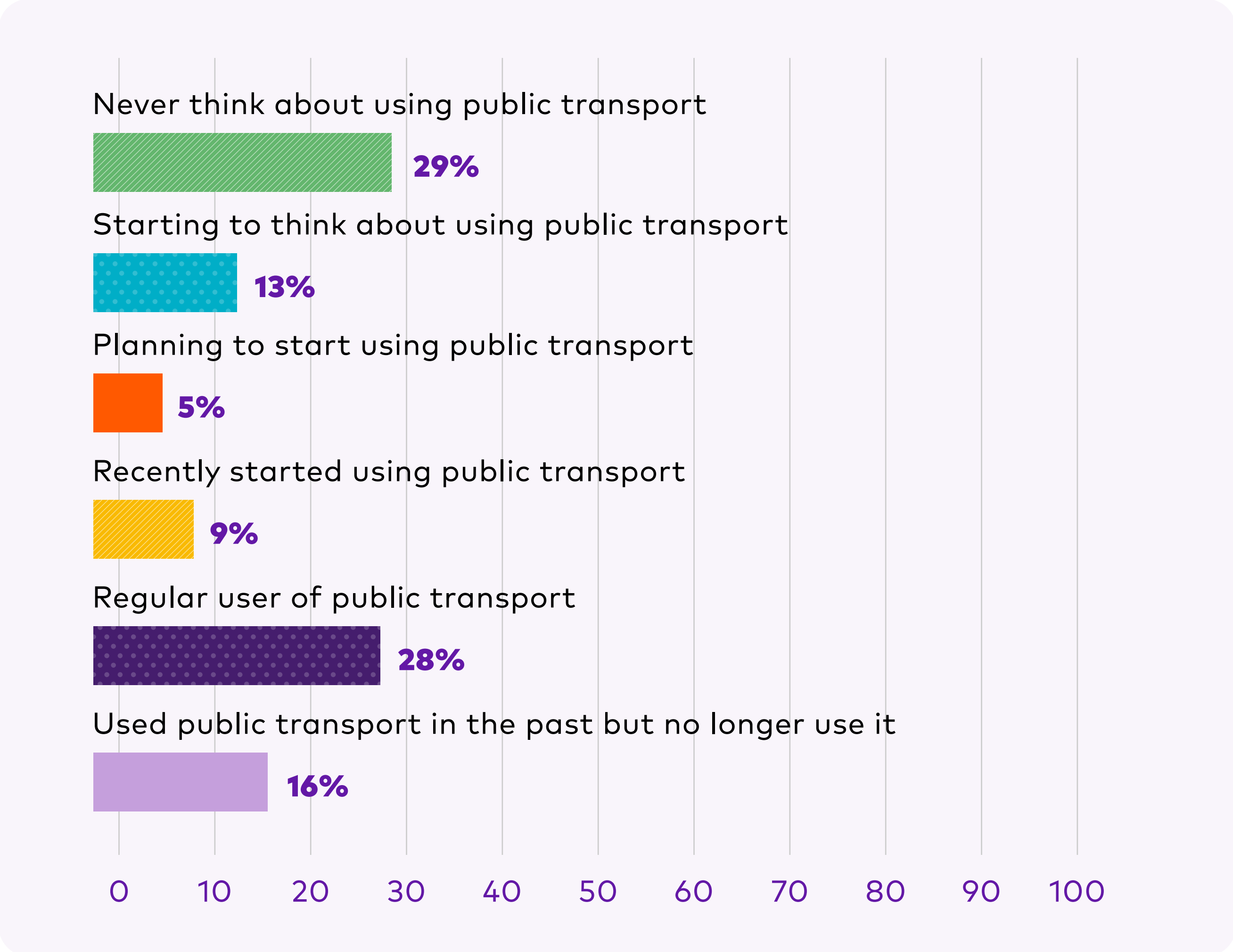
25% say they are dependent on public transport but most consumers say they are not (75%).

Those more likely to say they are dependent on public transport included younger consumers (16-34, 33%), those in lower social grades (ABC1, 22% vs. C2DE, 28%), those with a disability (30% vs. 23%) and those in lower income groups (<=£20K, 32).

13% are starting to think about, planning to start (5%) or recently started (9%) using public transport.

Table 01

In terms of how you see yourself in relation to public transport in Northern Ireland, please say at what stage you are currently at? [by public transport we mean buses and trains] (base=1,034)



4.2 Increasing the use of public transport

There is a view from consumers that public transport in Northern Ireland needs to offer more flexible solutions to meet the needs of those engaged in more complex journeys. More frequent bus and train services (22%), and improved service availability (18%), were the most important things that consumers believe need to change for consumers to use public transport more often.

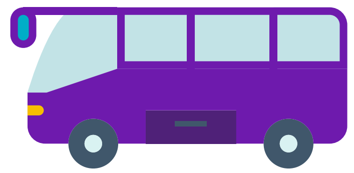
Cheaper fares were also important (15%), but free public transport was far less important (2%), suggesting it is not seen as a realistic option.

There is a range of actual and perceived barriers to greater use of public transport and these include living in a rural area, poor service availability, frequency and cost.

29% **say poor service availability/frequency is the single biggest barrier to using public transport (locationally inconvenient to access public transport, 20%: cost, 15%).**

<1/2 **Less than half of consumers believe that public transport in Northern Ireland is affordable (49%), convenient (45%) or is frequent enough to meet their needs (36%).**

Those living in rural areas were more likely to cite poor service availability/frequency as the biggest barrier (42% vs 23% in urban areas), whereas those in urban areas were more likely to say that cost is the single biggest barrier to using public transport more often (17% vs. 11% in rural areas).



4.3 Reducing private car use

General consumer sentiment is that it will be difficult to reduce their use of private cars and increase their use of public transport.

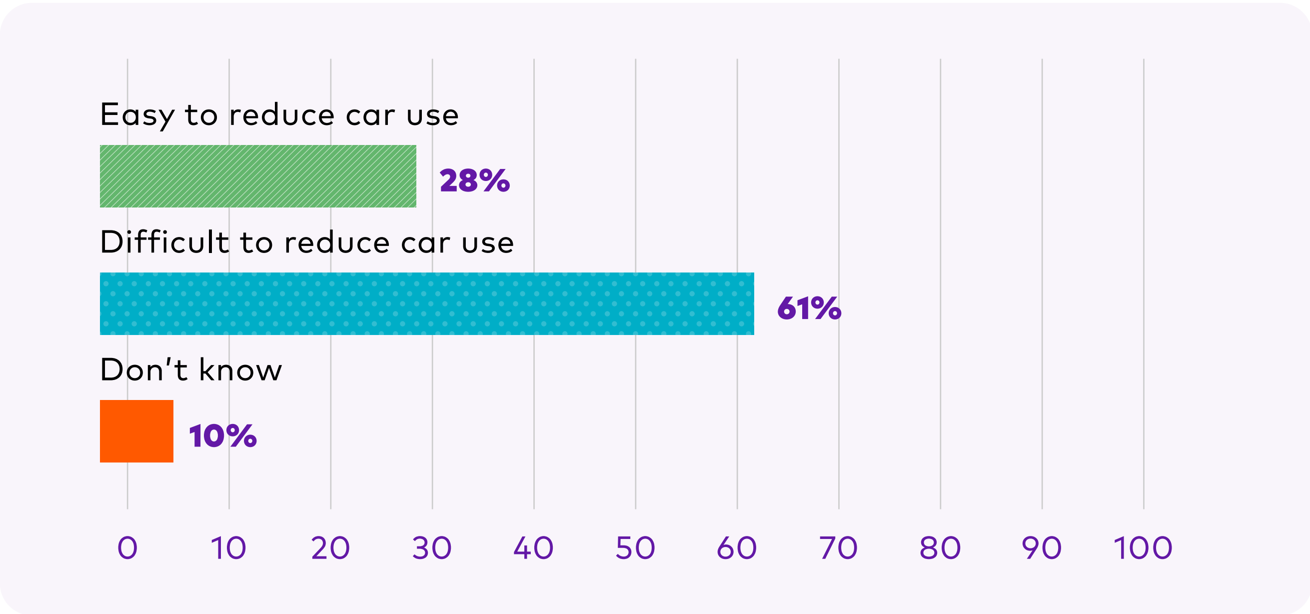
81% use or have access to a car.

61% believe that it would be difficult to reduce their use of private cars (easy, 28%). This rose to 78% for those living in rural areas.

Living in a rural area with a lack of nearby public transport is the most common reason consumers believe it would be difficult to reduce their use of private cars (25%), with the convenience offered by a private car over public transport cited by 18% of consumers and being disabled or having mobility problems cited by 9% of consumers.

Table 02

Would you find it easy or difficult to reduce your car use? (base=1,034)



Although most supported traffic calming measures to reduce the speed of traffic to accommodate other road users, as well as increasing the number of cycle lanes, there was less support for measures that would come at a cost to consumers (e.g. increasing taxation of petrol or diesel cars or increasing the cost of carparking to deter consumers from travelling to towns and cities by car). Only a minority of consumers supported congestion charging. Consumers believe that increasing the cost of carparking and discouraging consumers from bringing cars into towns and cities, will negatively impact on the commercial fabric of towns and cities.

65% support traffic calming measures to reduce the speed of traffic to accommodate other road users.

56% support increasing the number of cycle lanes.

51% support having 'low traffic neighbourhoods' where vehicle access is restricted.

60% are supportive of an Ultra Low Emission Zone (ULEZ) in Belfast City Centre (28% are unsupportive, 12% are undecided).

30% support congestion charging for those driving into cities and large towns in Northern Ireland.

16% support increased taxation of petrol and diesel cars to deter private car use.

23% support increasing the cost of carparking to deter people from driving into towns and cities.

Table 03

Please say to what extent you are supportive of each of the following measures. (n=1034)

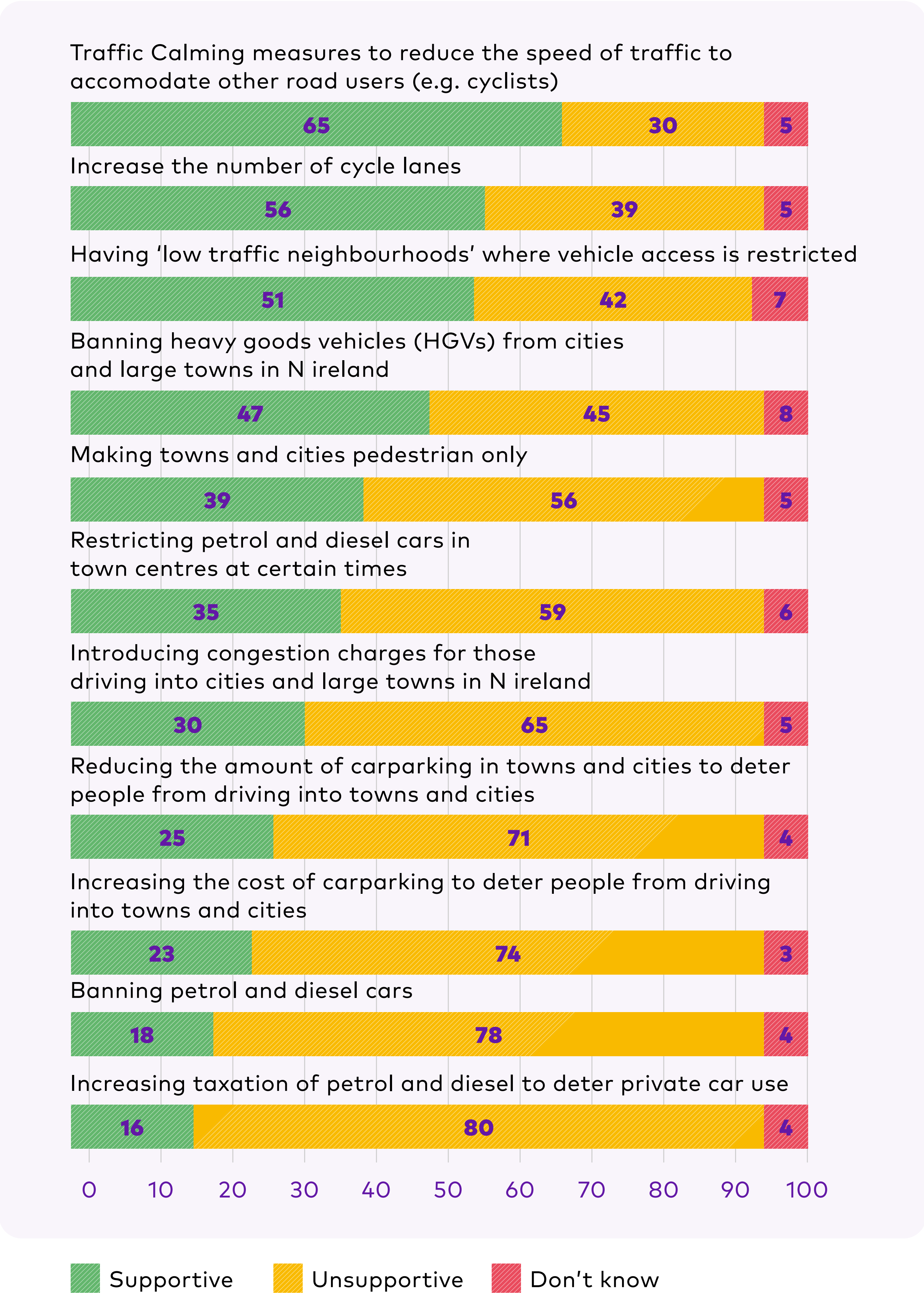
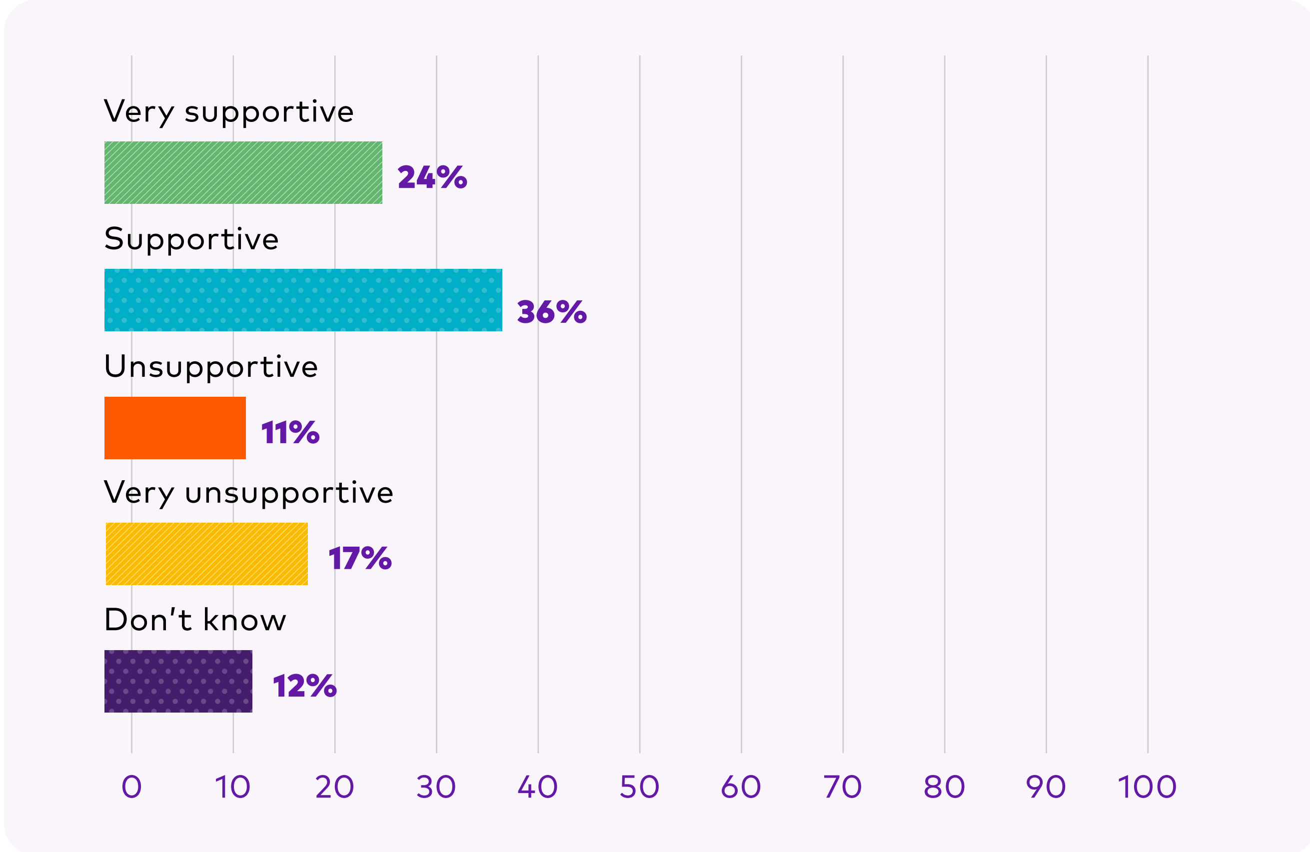
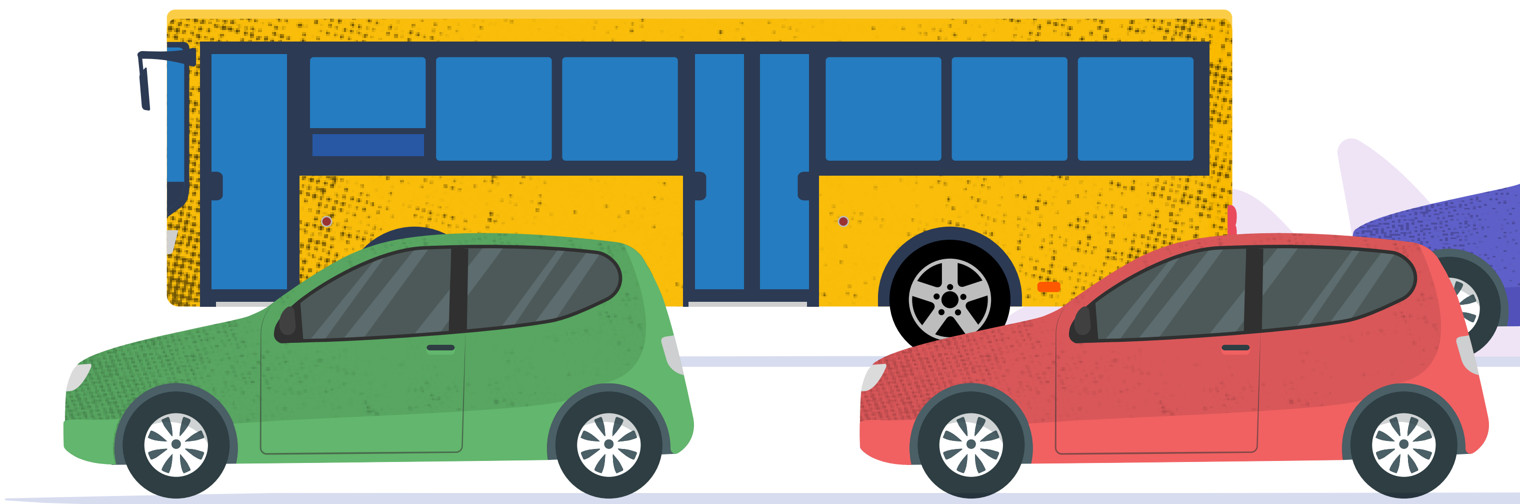


Table 04

How supportive are you of an Ultra Low Emission Zone (ULEZ) in Belfast City Centre? (base=1,007)





4.4 Pay for measures to reduce car use

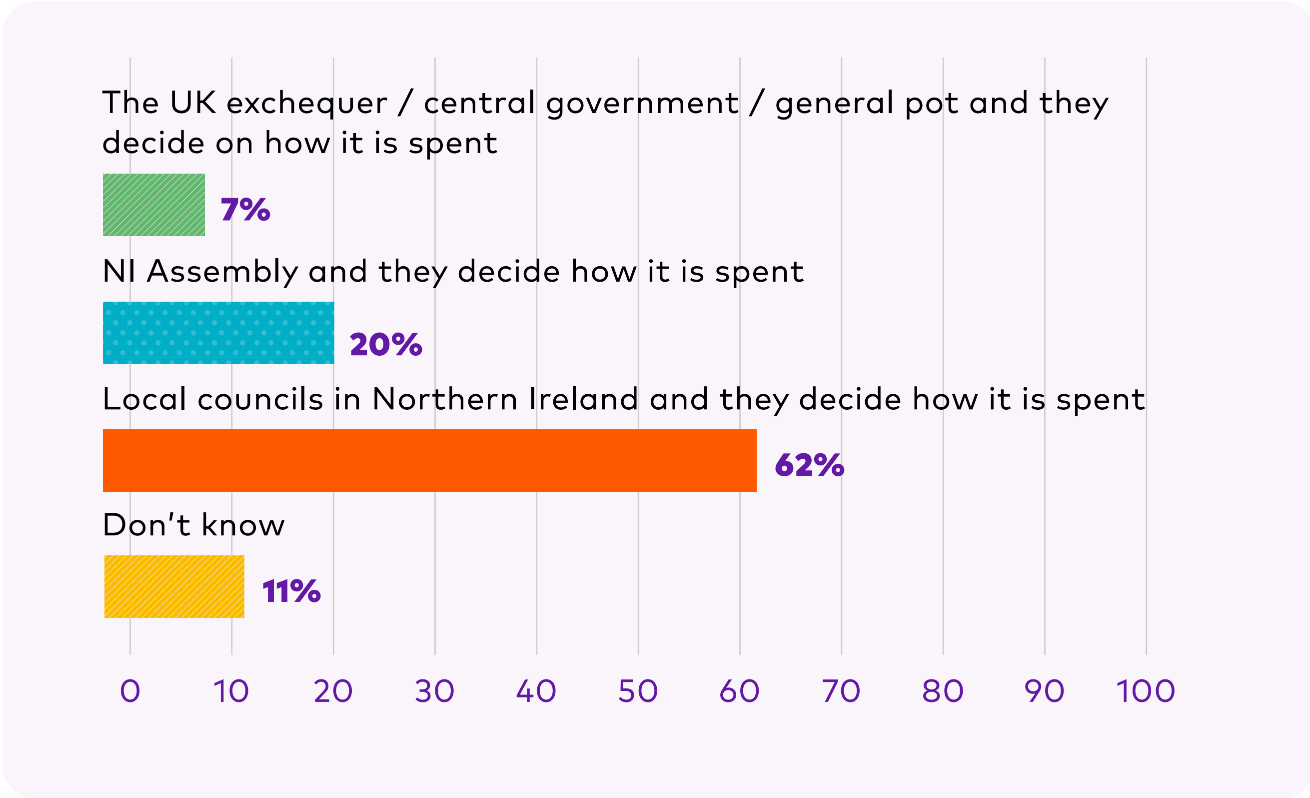
Although most consumers believe that investment in public transport in Northern Ireland is a priority, only a minority are willing to pay to reduce emissions from road transport in Northern Ireland. The common view is that either current users of road transport in Northern Ireland, or beneficiaries of new interventions to reduce emissions from road transport, should pay.

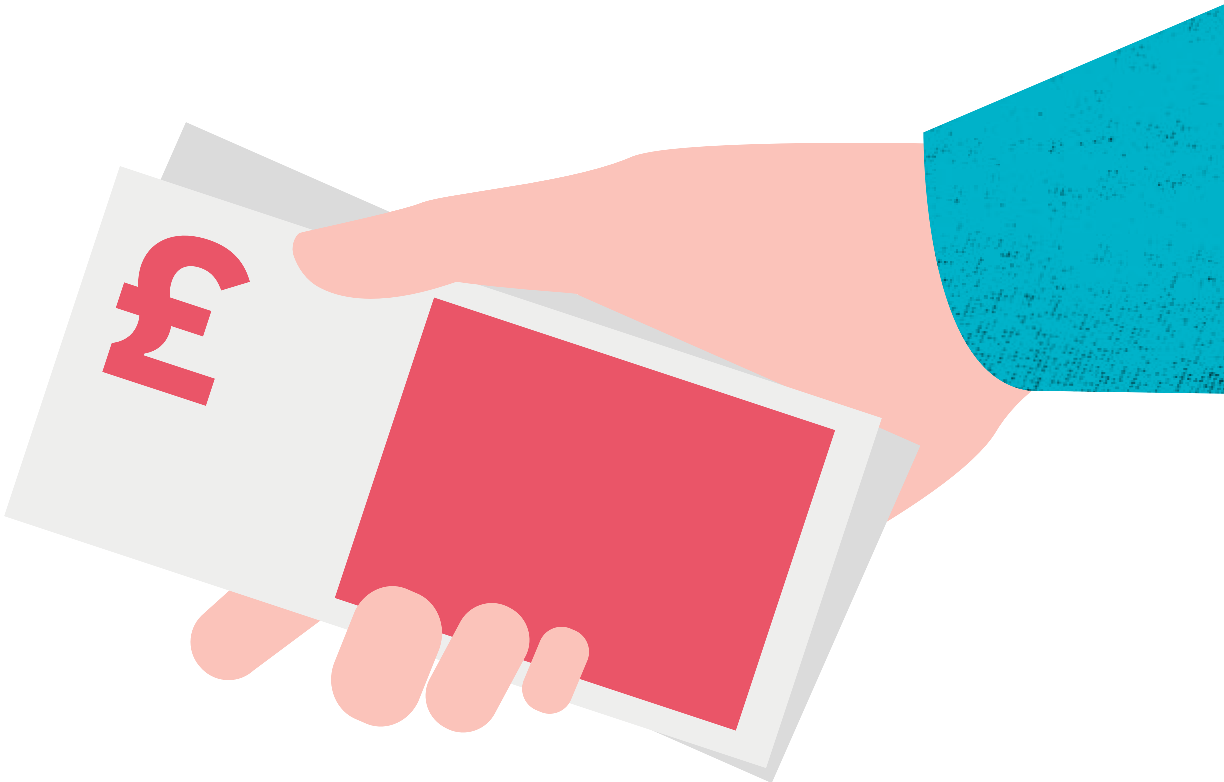
63%	**say investment in public transport in Northern Ireland is a priority (major, 25%: minor, 38%).**
33%	**of consumers are willing to pay to reduce emissions from road transport in Northern Ireland (44% are not).**
22%	**of consumers are willing to pay to reduce emissions from road transport in their local area (61% are not).**
62%	**say the money raised via congestion charging in NI should go to local councils and they decide how to spend it.**

£8.70	**is the average congestion charge fee that would stop consumers taking their car into a town or city.**
£6.10	**is the average hourly carparking rate that would stop consumers taking their car into a town or city.**

Table 05

If money is raised through the likes of congestion charging in Northern Ireland, where should this money go? (base=1,034)

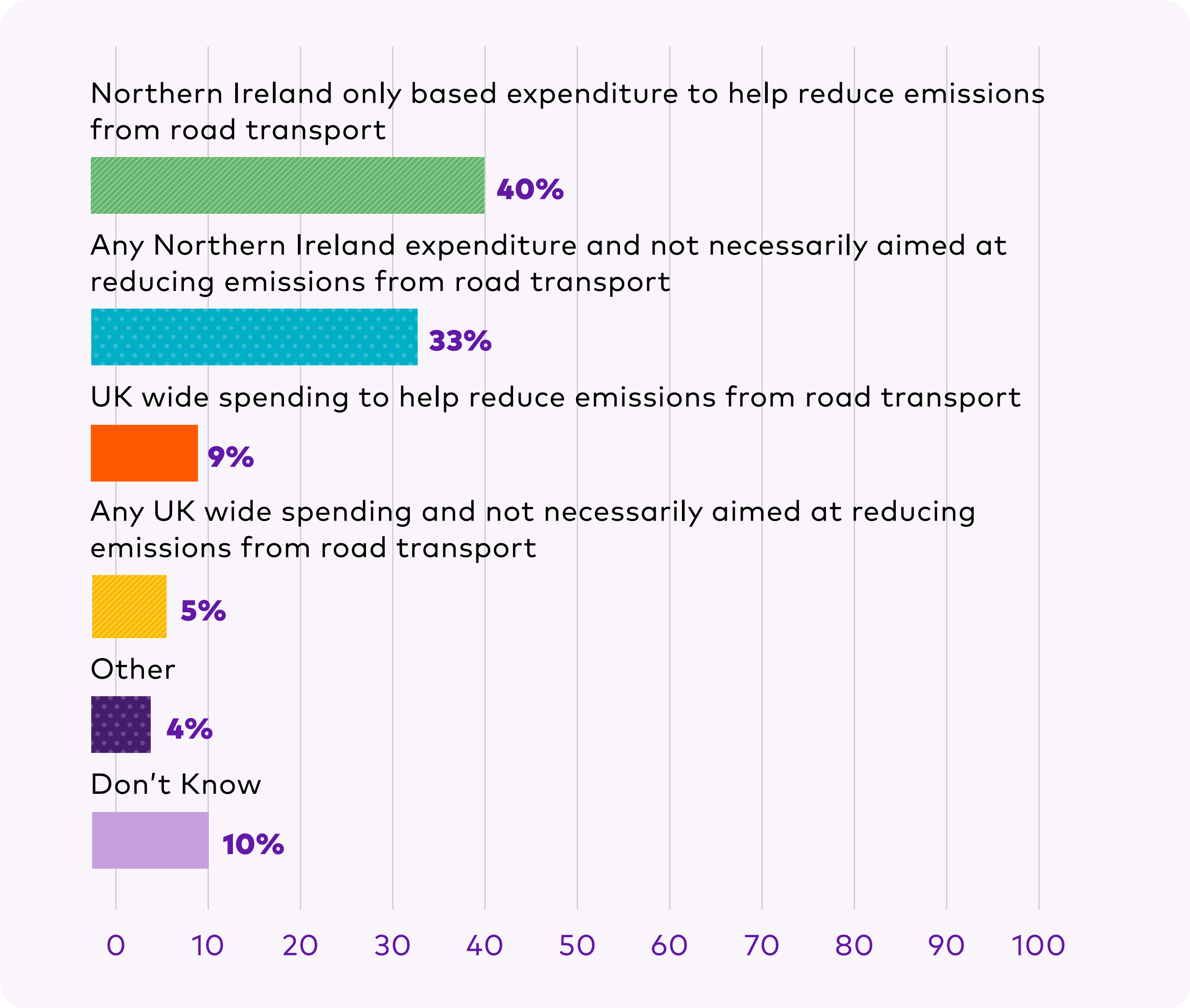




40% say that money raised via congestion charging should only be used to reduce road transport emissions in Northern Ireland (33% believe it should be used for general Northern Ireland expenditure).

Table 06

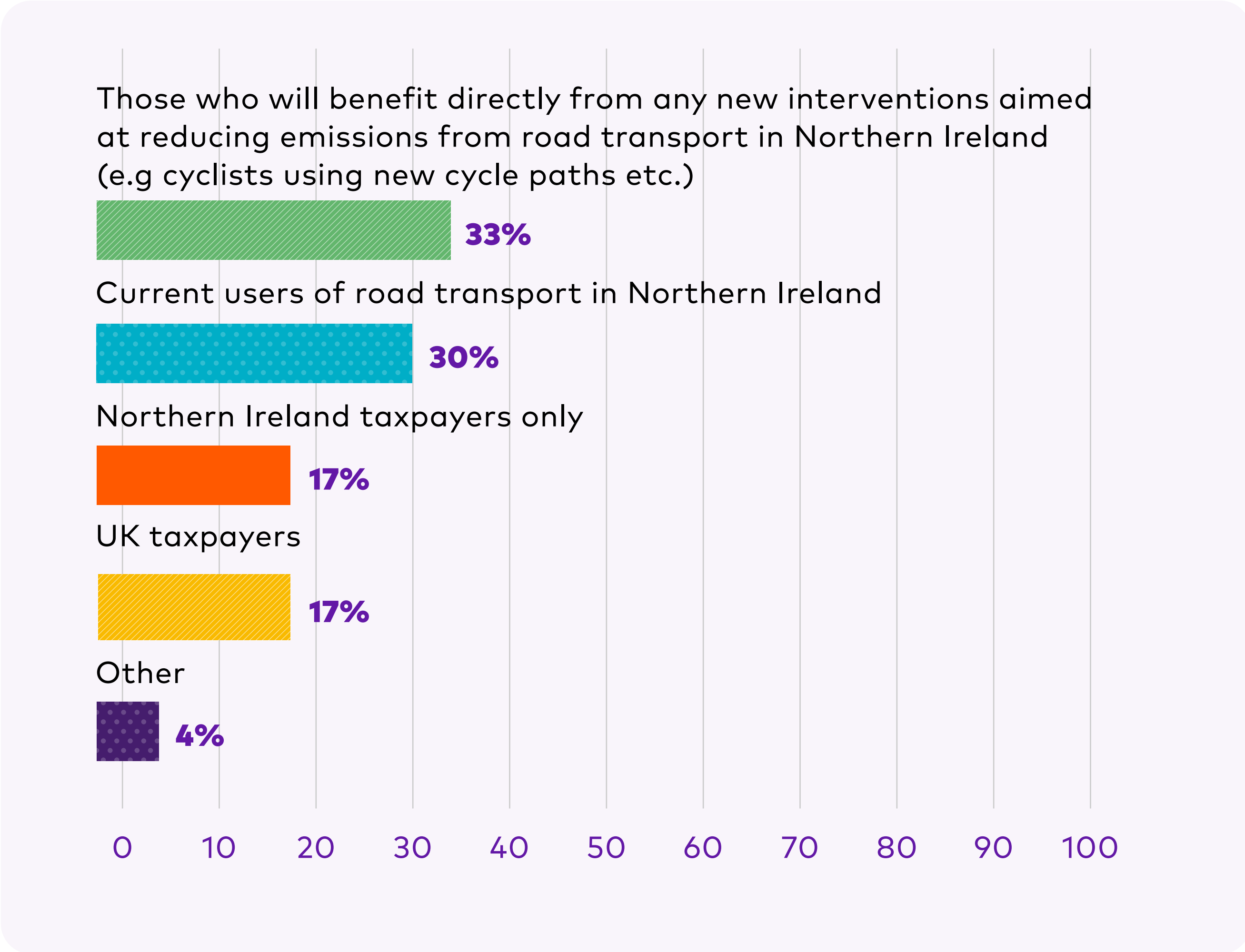
If money is raised through the likes of congestion charging in Northern Ireland, what should this money be spent on (base=1,034)



33% believe that only those who will benefit directly from any new interventions to reduce road transport emissions should pay for these interventions (30% believe current road transport users should pay).

Table 07

Reducing emissions from road transport in Northern Ireland will come at a cost. Who do you think should pay for this? (base=1,034)



4.5 Electric vehicles

4% use or have access to an electric car.

9% use or have access to a hybrid electric car.

22% said that a grant towards an electric car would be their greatest incentive to using a petrol or diesel car less.

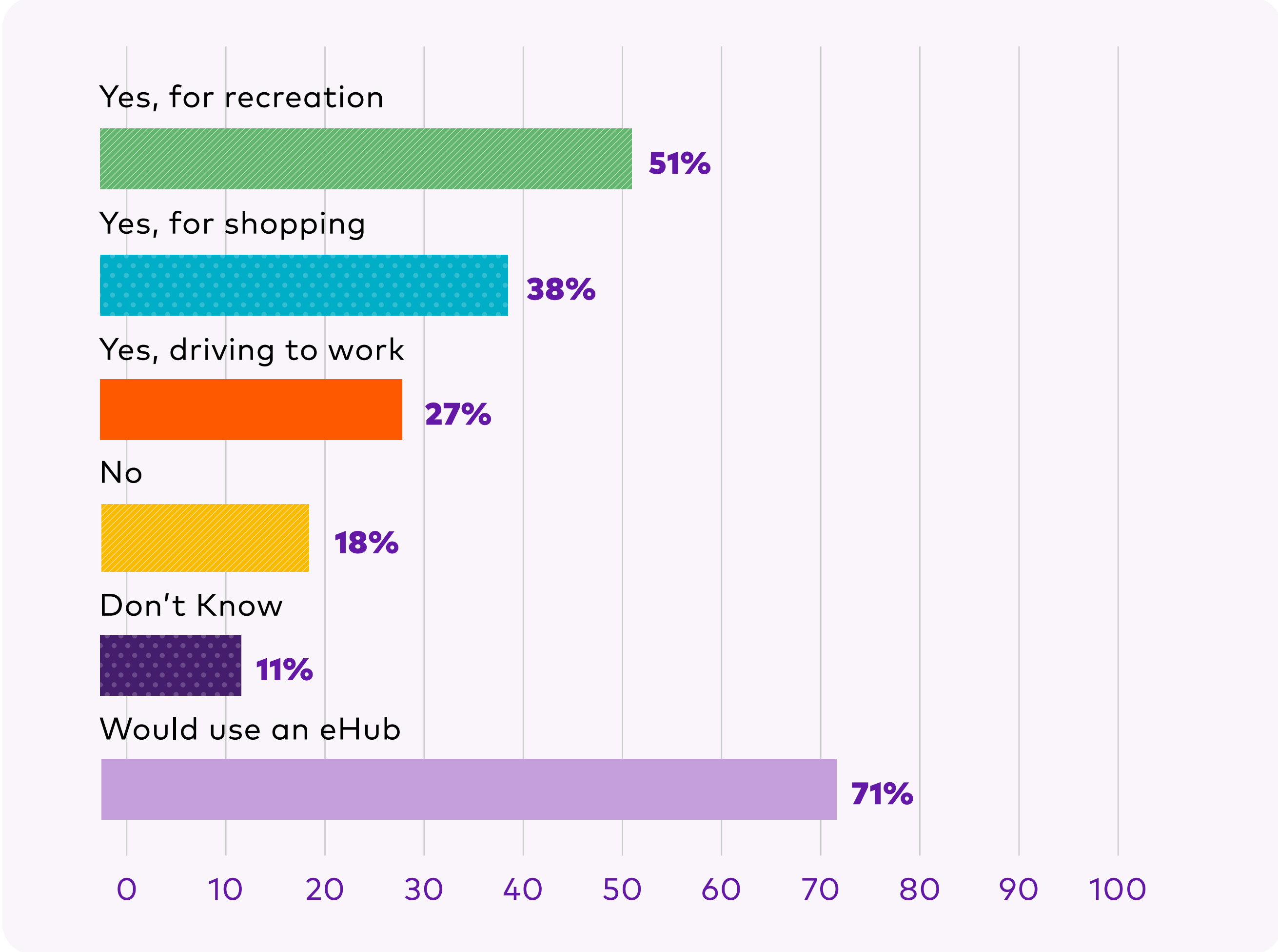
69% are interested in a try-before-you-buy scheme for electric bikes (20% are not and 11% are undecided).

71% said they would use an eHub[1] (51% for recreation, 38% for shopping and 27% for driving to work).

[1] eHubs are on-street locations that bring together shared e-bikes, e-cargobikes (for transporting goods or people), e-scooters, and e-cars, providing novel shared mobility solutions tailored towards different situations and target groups.

Table 08

If an eHub was available in your area, would you use it for any of the following? (base=1,007)



4.6 Views of businesses on measures to reduce car use in towns

70% of business owners believe that businesses in towns and cities would be disadvantaged if the cost of carparking in towns and cities increased to deter consumers from travelling to towns and cities by car (68% of consumers agree).

65% of business owners agreed that discouraging people from bringing their cars into towns and cities would give a commercial advantage to out-of-town retail / shopping centres (64% of consumers agree).

28% of businesses agree that currently public transport is good enough to be a viable alternative to bringing your car into towns and cities in Northern Ireland (28% of consumers agree).

4.7 Public information on changing travel mode

73% feel they need more information before deciding to change the way they travel.

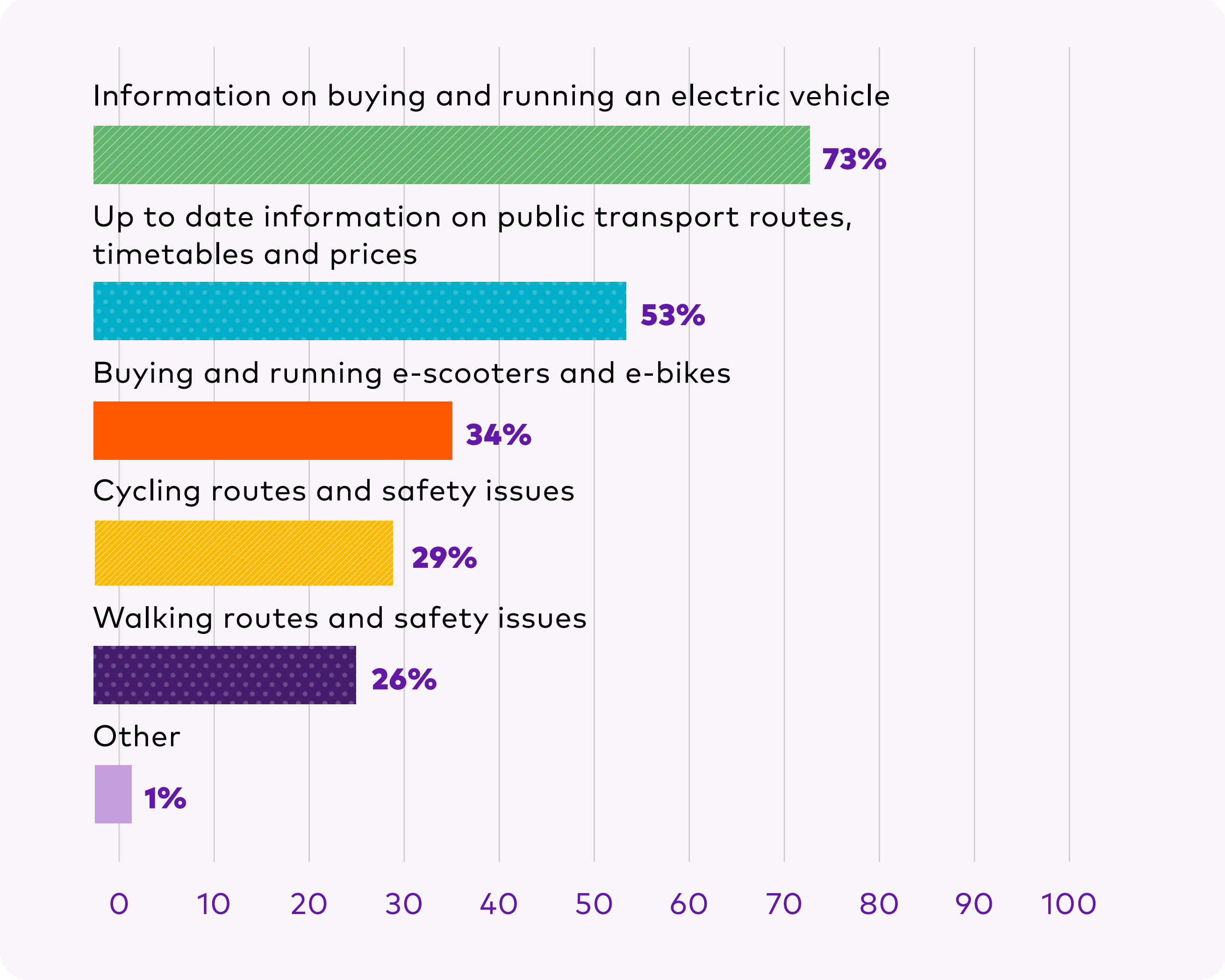
73% of those who want more information, want information on buying and running an electric vehicle.

53% of those who want more information, want up to date information on public transport.

75% prefer to be provided with online information on reducing their car use.

Table 09

Regarding reducing the amount you use your car, what information would you need? (base=731)



5. Conclusion

5.1 This research shows that the car continues to be the dominant mode of travel in Northern Ireland. Although most consumers aspire to be greener in their transport choices, they feel more needs to be done to make the alternatives to the car more appropriate to their needs. Consumers want the alternatives to the car to be affordable and most consumers are not willing to be financially penalised to give up the mode of transport that suits their needs and that many rely on. Consumers will need financial incentives, trustworthy information and confidence that alternative travel choices will meet all their needs.

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