

Addicted to cars; the role of car parking revenue for Irish local authorities and implications for state policy.



Galway Cycling Campaign
Feachtas Rothaíochta na Gaillimhe

Pre-Budget 2017 discussion document

Summary

We have identified a threat to state transport policies, where Irish local authorities may have a financial interest in encouraging more and more use of private cars. Local Authority managers may view it as in their direct interests to promote cars by using measures that discourage pedestrians, cyclists and public transport users. The state must act to remove reasons, whether financial or cultural, for promoting private cars instead of other transport modes. Local authorities must face financial penalties where they take road space away from sustainable transport to promote private cars. An obvious measure is to bring in a strategic state levy on car parking. This would also allow the state to support local town centres facing competition from out-of-town retail developments, and could be used to support park-and-ride schemes.

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Main Discussion

Formed after a large public meeting in 1998, the Galway Cycling Campaign (www.galwaycycling.org) aims to promote the needs of ordinary everyday bicycle users. Our aims include: safer conditions for cycling, planning that gives equal priority to all road users, improvement of facilities, secure parking for bikes, and recognising the rights and responsibilities of all road users.

The issues faced by cyclists in Galway are driven by national policies and practices and are shared with cyclists in other towns. Our proposals therefore have a general focus and impact. They also have an impact outside of cycling and serve to support walking, public transport and the commercial and community life of our towns and cities.

The difficulties Irish cyclists face often result from the systematic promotion of motorised traffic, particularly private cars, over the needs of other road users. This is partly a product of a particular “corporate culture” at local authority (LA) level, for example the use of hostile road designs such as roundabouts. But it may also be driven by financial considerations created by LA funding structures. The state has invested in measures intended to promote sustainable travel such as walking, cycling and public transport, yet little overall growth has been seen. The way local authorities use funds for sustainable transport often creates new problems or avoids fixing old ones. Unless the reasons for this are identified and fixed, the benefits from funding sustainable transport will be restricted. Worse: a situation continues where state funds meant to support sustainable transport end up being used essentially to facilitate car travel.

Removing road space from cyclists: Car parking and its place in local government finance



In various Irish towns road space has been taken from cyclists in order to provide on-street car parking. The traffic lanes that are left may be narrow, forcing cyclists into close proximity with heavy traffic. Although cycle facilities may be found on peripheral roads with low parking demand, they often seem to disappear just where they are needed, with cyclists finding their way blocked by parked cars and traffic jams. Regardless of whether or not specific cycling facilities are provided, cyclists require road space so they can keep moving and have some clearance from passing cars. The Irish cycling experience is that this road space often disappears close to town centres. This is one of the factors driving footpath cycling which is unlawful, inconveniences pedestrians and introduces additional risks for cyclists.

A particularly problematic example of how on-street parking can create a barrier to cycling is the creation of one-way streets so as to facilitate the dedication of road space to car parking. In the appendix below, we provide examples of cases where LAs have imposed one-way streets that effectively make it illegal for children to cycle to school.

Providing more space for cyclists and pedestrians

The reason many cities in Northern Europe have more space for cyclists and pedestrians is that they took it away from cars. A 2011 review of European parking policy states: “*Removal of on-street parking from historic districts and central shopping streets has become a signature feature of many European cities*”.ⁱ Some examples from that source:

- In the 1960s Copenhagen started removing car parking from the city centre. The space for some of Copenhagen’s cycle tracks was obtained by removing car parking. Between 2002 and 2008 Copenhagen replaced 219 parking spaces with cycle tracks removing on average 32 parking spots per year. Car-parking spaces are also replaced with bike parking. The on-street parking capacity taken away is replaced by off-street car parking.
- Between 2003 and 2011 Paris reduced its parking supply by 14,300 spaces and imposed parking fees on 95% of the spaces that were left. An estimated 4,000 parking bays were taken out to provide 1,451 new stations for about 20,000 Velib public rental bikes.
- Amsterdam has placed limits on parking supply and discourages new car parking spaces in zones close to public transport hubs. In Amsterdam, car parking in the historic core of the city costs €5 per hour.
- In 1996, Zurich placed a cap on parking supply in the city-centre, new off-street parking spaces must be matched by the removal of the same number of on-street spaces.

The role of car parking in local authority finances

Historically, Irish local government funding has been highly centralised, with much funding locked into specific projects agreed with central government and a very limited amount of ‘discretionary’ funding. Car parking fees, both from on-street and off-street parking are one important source of revenue which LAs can raise themselves and they are incentivised to maximise this revenue.

The success of car parking as a local authority business has been mixed.ⁱⁱ Some LAs appear to have lost money after investing in charging equipment,^{iii,iv,v} but other LAs – particularly in larger towns and cities – have found car parking to be a successful business. Figures in a 2010 report for the Irish Parking Association show that nationally, Irish LAs accounted for 27% of car-parking capacity and 33% of parking revenue.^{vi} The LA component of the business accounted for €115 million in annual revenue. The report does not give a break down for all towns but indicates that Dublin City Council has annual parking revenue of €36m from its parking activities. The report states that the three Dublin county councils generate more than €10m each year in parking revenue. The other four main city councils, i.e. Cork, Galway, Limerick and Waterford, are stated to have had a combined annual parking turnover of almost €20m. The report also reports “significant” parking revenue for other LAs as follows. Kilkenny (€3m); Clonmel (€1.9m); Wexford Borough Council (€1.8m). Sligo Borough Council (€1.7m); Ennis (€1.6m); Drogheda (€1.3m); Bray (€1.25m); Naas (€1.1m); Castlebar (€1m).

On-street parking is a large part of the car parking managed by Irish LAs, but they also operate concentrations of off-street car parking for financial gain. In Galway city, there is a possibly unusual situation where two local authorities operate paid parking facilities in the city centre. In addition to city council car parks, at weekends the county council runs its own paid car parking facility on lands attached to the county buildings. Galway Harbour reportedly makes more

money from car parking and rental activities than from port activities.^{vii}

In places like central Dublin, demand for car parking will always exceed supply. Shifts from driving to other forms of transport are unlikely to be seen as a threat here. In smaller towns, a reliance on parking revenue means that many LA managers may think the direct financial interests of the authority require them to attract as many car trips as possible into towns. A successful sustainable travel promotion programme, which would turn car-users towards walking, cycling and public transport, may be seen as a direct threat to this revenue source. It could still 'make sense' to draw down central funds for cycling or other schemes, as long as these could be used in a way that did not interfere with the prioritisation of car travel. A relevant observation here is that some Irish towns have remarkably few cycle parking spaces despite spending money on cycle facilities, which implies an intention to discourage cycling into towns, even while spending money on other measures targeted at cyclists (Galway City being a particular example.) In Galway City, if a couple decide to take public transport to the city centre to do their shopping the return trip will cost them €8. If they bring their car instead they can get all day parking in a council car park for €4. The council is effectively operating in competition with state subsidised public transport services.

This is speculation; we do not have the resources to look at Irish car parking policy in enough detail to say if a successful sustainable travel programme is a real financial threat to any given LA. But it is clear that providing space for cyclists, where most needed, can be seen as against the LA's financial interests. Indeed, in some cases key measures in implementing state Smarter Travel projects have simply been ignored – for example the Galway City Public Bike scheme, discussed in Appendix 1.

A need for permit-only parking schemes

There is a perception by some that LA parking loses money so this must be discussed. All parking is not the same: paid parking on strategic routes may pay for itself handsomely, while parking in areas such as minor residential roads and housing estates may lose money. Why would LAs implement paid parking at locations where they lose money? The answer is simple: because of demand from residents. In some residential areas with "free" parking, non-resident commuters may take advantage by also parking their cars. Residents then demand action to preserve parking for their own use. Ireland already lacks basic legislation to manage roads and parking. Elsewhere it is possible to simply make designated roads "residents only" or "residents parking only", but Irish LAs only have power to implement paid parking or "disk parking". The only legal mechanism available may be to implement disk parking along with all the accompanying measures: line painting, ticket machines and so on, then to issue permits to residents. Outside commuters may then move elsewhere to park, further reducing the returns for the ticket machines, etc. This approach uses a sledgehammer to crack a nut. The solution is to introduce laws allowing access or parking on certain roads to be limited to people who hold permits issued by the local council. The LA may then charge for parking permits and avoid unnecessary costs for the measures that go with disk parking. The legal concept of resident-only streets and permit-only parking is well established in Germany.

The Irish state needs to step in

If some Irish local authorities view the promotion of car use as in their immediate financial self-interest, then clearly they cannot be used as the main agencies in growing sustainable transport. If on-street car parking is treated as untouchable, then a state effort focused on funding roadside cycle facilities cannot deliver for cyclists in many Irish town and city centres. An exception might be the parts of Dublin where the Wide Streets Commission of the 1700s created many very wide streets. These may have enough space to combine both generous on-street car parking and cycle facilities. This width may not be generally available in most other Irish towns.

Local authorities' ability to earn money from car parking creates a direct conflict of interest regarding state efforts to promote sustainable transport. Paid car parking gives Irish LAs a direct incentive to pursue growth in car traffic and encourage greater use of cars. By permitting LAs to charge for parking on streets, the state is encouraging them to take road space away from other forms of transport such as cycling. Even where on-street parking is free, it still represents the removal of road space from other forms of transport, and a way must be found to address this. If LAs are permitted to operate off-street car parking for profit, then they have an incentive to promote private cars over other forms of transport.

We need measures to identify, and financially penalise, roads authorities that misuse roads capacity on main routes for car parking. Other countries have faced similar issues. A document on Danish Cycling policy states: *“New parking spaces requiring fees or higher rates are, however, subject to Danish government restrictions based on the idea that the local authorities should not use paid parking as a source of revenue. This means that such income is deducted from government subsidies.”*^{viii}

The solution: Strategic car parking levies

The damaging financial incentives that have been created partly result from the abolition of local rates in the 1970s. Now that property taxes are being restored, this provides an alternative income stream that allows a rebalancing of LA activities in a positive direction. If the state wishes to grow sustainable transport, then it must act directly to remove incentives that promote car use. It must also act to correct local authority actions that promote private cars and damage and discourage other forms of transport. There must be a way to penalise LAs that take road space away from cyclists and public transport on key routes for the purpose of parking cars. There may be a strategic need to provide off-street car parking in towns but LAs should not profit with the result that promoting car travel becomes an end in itself. As a first step, the state needs to financially penalise on-street car parking on key corridors particularly where it involves one-way street restrictions. The state must also make all other LA parking revenue-neutral. It is intended that this will result in the removal of on-street car parking.

It is likely that town-centre business interests will react with consternation and panic to the idea of any car-parking being interfered with. This is a natural reaction and their genuine concerns must be addressed. The solution we propose is for the state to introduce strategic levies on car parking supply. As shown below, these could also have other uses apart from aligning local authority behaviour with state policy. The scheme should be structured so that it is flexible and can be applied by order rather than requiring primary legislation for any changes. A system of levies that could be applied either to local authority parking or other locations might offer the simplest overall mechanism for delivering on state goals.

Rebalancing retail and other services in favour of local town centres

Town centre retailers and other businesses tend to view widespread on-street car parking as good for their interests. Town centre retailers tend to portray parking charges as driving customers towards out-of-town shopping developments. It is difficult not to feel some sympathy for this position in cases where poor planning has allowed large out-of-town shopping centres to out-compete our established town centres. They are correct that the issue must be addressed, but they may be looking at the problem from the wrong end.

The underlying problem is that out-of-town centres have been allowed an unfair advantage by offering free car parking. The solution is not through a race to the bottom by pursuing free car parking at all costs at all locations, but rather measures to rebalance the playing field. The greater societal good is served by applying tax measures that favour the relocation of retail services to places in the communities they serve. Many out-of-town shopping centres should never have been permitted. Where the nature of the business required an out-of-town location, they should not have been permitted to also attract tenants that compete with town centre activities.

An obvious way to tackle this unfair advantage is to apply car parking levies to out-of-town shopping centres. Town centres must control demand for car parking, and charges are an obvious way to do this. If town centres cannot avoid parking charges, then out-of-town shopping centres should not be permitted to avoid parking charges. The purpose of out-of-town shopping centres should be to offer services that cannot be offered in town centres. Owners of such premises should be blocked from trying to compete in other market segments. Mandatory parking charges through a state-imposed strategic parking levy would help achieve this.

Park and ride

Park-and-ride schemes are sometimes proposed as a way to tackle traffic congestion in our larger cities. The idea is that potential users of long-term car parking drive to car parks on the city outskirts, where they change to public transport for the journey to the city centre. There is often some form of state investment, either in providing the physical site or the public transport that services it. If car-commuters have a ready supply of cheap long-term car parking at their destination, this discourages them from using the park-and-ride service. The result is a loss on the state's investment and a failure to tackle the congestion that was the original purpose of the scheme. If the LA also provides city-centre parking, this creates a conflict of interest in the outcome of the park-and-ride programme.

To support Park and Ride (and public transport generally) the state must step in to restrict the availability of cheap, long-term car parking in city centres. A strategic parking levy is a way to do this. It would allow a minimum price to be imposed at strategic locations and hence support alternatives provided by the taxpayer. In this situation the levies would be imposed not just on local authority parking but on private operators as well.

Appendix 1: Public Bike Share in Galway

Public bike share schemes have proved very popular. The Irish state recently invested in a scheme for Galway, with funds spent installing stations and providing the bikes and associated services to support it. This investment was based on a 2011 report for the National Transport Authority examining the potential for bike share schemes in Galway and other cities.^{ix} The report referred several times to the need for two-way (contraflow) cycling arrangements on one-way streets, e.g.: *“Recommendations are made on the complementary measures which would be needed as a new scheme is introduced. Perhaps the most important one would be an increase in permeability for cycle traffic in the city centres through the provision of two-way cycling on one-way streets, and by opening up pedestrianised areas to cycling where conditions allow.”* Despite this, no changes were made to the one-way-street system in Galway to support Bikeshare, and no such streets in Galway are currently two-way for cyclists. Another curiosity is that at some locations existing bike parking was removed to install Bikeshare stations. It is a widely held belief, among all stakeholders, that the bike scheme in Galway has been a failure.

Two-way cycling on suitable one-way streets has a good safety record abroad, and is provided for under Irish law (SI273/98, SI274/98). Bremen in Germany started providing two-way cycling in 1980. In Belgium, all one-way streets in 50kph zones can be made two-way for cyclists where conditions allow. A similar situation applies in France for 30kph zones. In 1979 a report published by An Foras Forbartha (The National Institute for Physical Planning and Construction Research) recommended the provision of contraflow cycling on Galway city’s one-way streets.^x The 1999 Galway City Development Plan had an objective of providing a contraflow cycle lane on a one-way street in the city. In 2004, Galway’s elected city council put a specific objective into the 2005–11 city development plan to provide two-way cycling on one-way streets where feasible. This objective was restated in the 2011 city development plan. There are no major legislative, political or safety obstacles to fixing one-way streets in Galway city.

So there is a 35-year history of official proposals for two-way cycling on Galway’s one-way streets – yet nothing has been done. A bike share scheme was proposed for Galway with the recommendation that one-way streets be made two-way for cyclists. But when the scheme was applied, with state funds, it did not bring in this key supporting measure. The question must be asked: Why would Galway city council spend state funds in a manner that directly undermines the recommendations of the report that justified their use? Could it be because if the council made these streets two-way for cyclists, they would have to take out disk parking spaces and lose the income? A state-imposed strategic parking levy that dealt with one-way streets would resolve this matter.



Galway City: Google Street View showing Market St. at the Connacht Tribune Office. The street is one-way going towards the viewer. There is a Bikeshare station on Mainguard Street near St Nicholas Church in the background. The distance to the next Bikeshare station at Newtownsmith is 350m. Because of the one-way street system and a ban on cycling in the pedestrian zone, the return journey from Newtownsmith to Mainguard St. is 1.1km by the northern Route and 2.1 km by the southern route. In the background is St Patricks National School - schoolchildren face similar diversions. The disk parking arrangements with painted parking lanes and ticket machines can be seen.

Appendix 2: The impact of one-way streets and disk parking on school children

The pictures below show situations where Galway city and county councils have effectively made it illegal for children to cycle to school by the most direct route. Examples in Galway city include the “Bish” Secondary School in Nuns Island and Scoil Náisiúnta Iognáid in Raleigh Row. In the county town of Tuam there are three schools near the centre on the Dublin Road, yet the county council has made a strategic section of this road one-way – apparently to provide disk parking. Two primary schools (the Mercy and Presentation Convent) and one post-primary school (St Bridget’s) are affected. The net effect is to make it illegal for children from the south side of town to cycle to school. It also makes it illegal for children from the north side to cycle home by the most direct route. In Loughrea there are two primary and two post-primary schools in the Moore St/Cross St area. But the county council has made Moore St one-way, again effectively banning some children from cycling to school by the most convenient route.



**Nuns island, home of the "Bish" secondary school. Historically the Bish had one of the highest rates of cycling in the city (24%)
Do you think its right to make it illegal to cycle to school?**

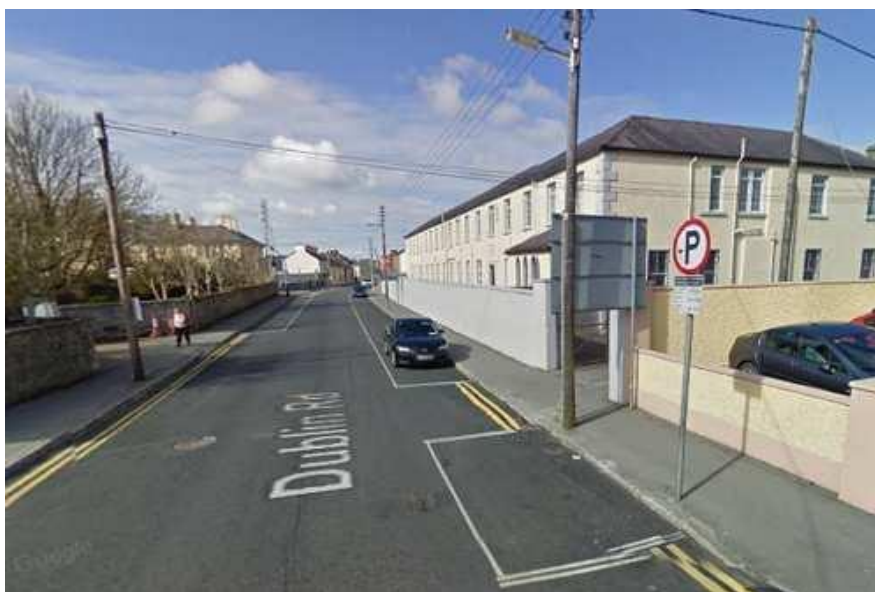
Galway City: Galway Cycling Campaign poster highlighting the issue of one-way streets and severance for schoolchildren.



Tuam: Google Street View showing Dublin Rd at the Presentation Convent school. The road is one-way, making it illegal for schoolchildren to cycle in both directions. The disk parking arrangements with painted parking lanes and ticket machines can be seen.



Tuam: Google Street View showing Dublin Rd at the Mercy Convent school. The road is one-way, making it illegal for schoolchildren to cycle in both directions. The disk parking arrangements with painted parking lanes and ticket machines can be seen.



Tuam: Google Street View showing Dublin Rd at St Bridget's post-primary school. The road is one-way, making it illegal for schoolchildren to cycle in both directions. The disk parking arrangements with painted parking lanes can be seen.

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- ⁱ Kodransky, M. and Hermann, G. (2011) Europe's Parking U-Turn: From Accommodation to Regulation. Institute for Transportation and Development Policy. Spring, 2011.
 - ⁱⁱ Melia, P. (2012) Pressure to scrap parking fees as councils lose money. *Irish Independent*, 22 Feb.
 - ⁱⁱⁱ Bagnall, R. (2012) €4,000 a month is wasted on Car Park. *Evening Echo*, 24 November.
 - ^{iv} Galvin, C. (2012) County Council losing €40,000 a year on paid parking. *Mayo News*, 4 September.
 - ^v Nee, M. (2012) Council losing money with on-street parking. *Galway Advertiser*, 23 February.
 - ^{vi} Irish Car Parking Sector Market Report (2010) Prepared for: Irish Parking Association, School of Marketing, Dublin Institute of Technology. November 2010.
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 - ^{viii} Andersen T., Bredal, F., Weinreich, M., Jensen, N., Riisgaard-Dam, M. & Kofod Nielsen, M. (2012) Collection of Cycle Concepts. Cycling Embassy of Denmark.
 - ^{ix} Jacobs Engineering Ireland Ltd. (2011) Proposals for Introducing Public Bike Schemes in Regional Cities – Technical Feasibility Study. National Transport Authority, 30 June.
 - ^x Brennan, M.J. (1979) Bicycle Travel in Galway City. RS 242, An Foras Forbartha.