

Camcycle AGM Report

The guest speaker at our AGM was Professor Ian Walker, Head of the School of Psychology at Swansea University. Camcycle member Edward Taylor sums up some of his key points.

Professor Walker's talk wasn't a rallying speech but something more useful: clear, evidence-based reasons why changing how we travel is both possible and necessary. Walker is a psychologist who studies how people think about transport. He's not a cycling campaigner or a politician, which is exactly why his research matters. It provides scientific support that strengthens policy arguments.

Key facts from a car-dependent society

Walker focused on the need for compelling arguments for modal shift. His talk remained primarily within the transport frame, though he touched on planning, land use, and gender in questions. He presented six core claims:

1. Most car trips could easily be made another way. Nearly seven in ten journeys of one to five miles are still made by car, even though most are not commuting. Social trips are the leading purpose, followed by shopping.
2. People responding to consultations often misjudge how others feel. Most support measures that enable travel without cars.
3. Small restrictions work better than gentle encouragement. Making car use slightly less convenient changes behaviour more than nudges or incentives.
4. Car-dominated streets emerged gradually, without public consent. Undoing this isn't 'social engineering' – it's correcting a mistake.
5. Most people exhibit a cognitive bias called motonormativity, which blinds them to the injustice of car dominance and how it arose.
6. Cars cause wide-ranging harms: physical inactivity, inequality, exclusion, unsafe streets, inhibited development in children, air pollution, and loss of public space.

These points form a founding story: cars became dominant by habit despite their harms, and society has grown accustomed to their convenience. Car dominance is now seen as inevitable, even though alternatives are widely supported. This represents a failed development path, locking society into a system that is hard to escape. Partly, this is because car dominance has shaped our worldview, influencing how we perceive change. Even deliberative democratic processes are vulnerable to the status quo bias.

Challenging motonormativity

Walker set out the democratic logic underlying his work. Car dominance was never the subject of a collective, informed decision; it emerged gradually, step by step. Therefore, challenging its harmful effects is not radical social engineering but a reassessment of a path we drifted into. His research on motonormativity helps explain why that reassessment feels so difficult, revealing how deeply embedded assumptions shape what we see as normal or inevitable. What's more, these transport assumptions vary depending on where you live (UK or US, vs the Netherlands for example) and the different physical, cultural and social communities you experience.

A useful thought experiment would be to imagine a world without cars as the baseline. What kind of streets, services and daily routines would we design? Framed this way, the task is not to 'remove' something essential, but to ask what truly serves people and communities. By allowing ourselves to picture alternative possible worlds, we loosen the grip of the status quo and create a foundation for change in transport and beyond.

As a systems thinker, Walker encouraged us to see car dependence through multiple lenses. He pointed to its wide-ranging impacts: on public health, on social cohesion, on patterns of suburban sprawl, and on household finances. People who never drive are also affected. Cars shape the environments we all inhabit, influencing how active we are, how safely people can move, and how connected communities feel.

We have become so accustomed to road danger that we treat it as inevitable rather than designed. A street that appears efficient when judged purely by traffic flow can look very different from the pavement: difficult to cross, isolating for residents, noisy, polluted and an expensive use of land. Seen this way, car dominance is not a single transport issue but a system that produces harms across many domains of daily life.

For campaigners, the most practical takeaway was simple: don't start by defending a particular scheme. Start by asking what services people should be able to reach and how easily. Can children get to school safely? Can older people reach shops and community? Can daily life function without a car? If the answers are no, the system has failed.

Walker's talk felt like the beginning of something rather than a conclusion. If this research continues to shape arguments for better streets, it could make the case for change clearer, braver and harder to ignore.

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