



To: City Development

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Subject: Essential Evidence on a page: No.50 Peak Oil

Top line: The city regions that will prosper this century will be those that successfully adapt their approach to transport. Within densely populated areas the normal choice will be safe, reliable, comfortable and affordable public transport combined with walking and cycling.

An increasing number of experts and commentators including business leaders¹ warn that the era of cheap oil is over. An oil crunch is likely within the next decade. An oil crunch would fundamentally threaten the way our city operates with challenges to transport, healthcare, food distribution, social cohesion, public services and other sectors. Bristol is the first local authority to commission a report on the implications of Peak Oil.²

Peak oil describes the point at which the amount of oil produced globally in a single year reaches its absolute maximum. From this point onwards, oil will still be produced but at a lesser volume. After peaking, oil production will ultimately decline. Estimates on timing vary. There is a growing consensus, however, that the era of cheap oil is over, and that an oil crunch in the next decade is likely. The consequences of constrained supply are likely to be severe and disruptive. Food and fuel poverty are already a significant problem. Examples of dysfunction due to oil shocks have already been experienced in Bristol, the UK and Europe including panic buying, increases in fuel related crime and riots.

The report identifies that the city is highly vulnerable to an oil shock in its reliance on motor-based travel into and around the city. Our current way of life relies on the availability of an abundant supply of cheap oil. Economic studies suggest that without a cheap and plentiful supply of energy, economic growth is not possible and that high oil prices result in recessions. The authors note that whilst the effects of climate change are already being strongly felt in some parts of the world, it is likely that the effects of peak oil will hit the UK harder first. Peak oil fundamentally alters the viability of the private car as the leading mode of transport. Yet current transport policy does not recognize peak oil as a challenge and will not lead to a transport system that is resilient to peak oil. Political challenges undoubtedly exist around making changes while fuel remains affordable and available. However, the need to drastically reduce green house gas emissions, the economic cost of congestion and potential well-being benefits all support the case to build a genuinely sustainable public transport system with vastly improved accessibility.

Public transport system needs to be designed to be both convenient and affordable at a scale which meets the travel needs of the community it serves. However, privately run services are vulnerable to high oil prices and may not serve the broader needs of the city. In contrast, both walking and cycling are far more resilient although with limiting factors of distance and carrying capacity. The report notes that ensuring that cycling is a viable transport option in Bristol in the face of peak oil relies on building up levels of cycle use and ownership in advance but seeking to raise the number of people who regularly cycle to over 70% in the future. This means creating safe cycling conditions for cyclists of all ages with an infrastructure which makes cycling an easy option.

¹ UK Industry Taskforce on Peak Oil and Energy Security, 2010 The Oil Crunch - a wake-up call for the UK economy, London: UK Industry Taskforce on Peak Oil and Energy Security. <http://peakoiltaskforce.net/> accessed 5th March 2010.

² Bristol Green Momentum Group, 2008 Building a positive future for Bristol after Peak oil, www.bristolgreencapital.org accessed 5th March 2010.