

A Hello Mary, are you well?

B Yes, thanks John, but you look pretty stressed.

A I am. I was in Central London this morning. Miserable! Not just the winter weather, but it was a portrait of traffic hell. Vehicles everywhere, a maze of construction and utility works; at one point, a flood of white vans appeared, as if a fleet controller had ordered an invasion of the West End of London. It was total chaos!

B But I thought London had eradicated cars from its streets? Are Britons ignoring the rules?

A Not at all. It is only private cars that are banned from central London. The idea, of course, is to fight air pollution and climate change. London was followed by many other towns in the UK: Brighton is the latest city to propose a zone where private car journeys are banned; and many other big cities are planning to do the same. So, we're really getting the cars off the road. In central London, there are none at all.

B That's what I thought. I remember London brought in a fee 17 years ago, the congestion charge. But even before that traffic wardens, bus lanes and double-yellow lines were a gradual deterrent. The culture of being able to drive and park wherever you like no longer exists.

A This is true for private cars. But it doesn't help the overall situation. Traffic is moving more slowly than ever. There are more vans and more Uber cars which add to the cab drivers. The increasing number of cycle lanes make the streets narrower. There are often four-way pedestrian crossings, and wider pavements. Any one of those makes perfect sense individually. But all together they help create gridlock. Buses get completely blocked.

B This sounds crazy, really. Why don't people take the tube or trains? They're quite good, aren't they?

A The thing is, the bus is the main mode of transport for Londoners. This is especially so among disabled people, those with mobility problems and the poorest residents. For them, the tube or train is too difficult or expensive. Frozen bus prices, special low fares for an hour's journey, have made buses even cheaper under the current mayor, Sadiq Khan. However, the network has shrunk and overall bus use is declining. I've given up myself. The average speed of my number 11 bus was 4mph. I can walk faster than that. Increasing congestion is a huge problem.

B No wonder it's getting worse. London has an enormous amount of new construction and new infrastructure.

A This generates trips, and a lot of road space is needed for the construction traffic. Some roads are blocked off, or are made one way. So satellite navigation systems aren't effective.

B All those Amazon parcels delivered by hundreds of commercial vehicles are a problem, I imagine!

A Yes, the fastest multiplying element of traffic everywhere is the light commercial vehicle – better known as the delivery van. Van journeys have shot up by 25% in the past decade in Britain, with the expansion of online shopping. Even logistics firms, whose business is fuelled by shoppers, grumble privately about the craziness of Amazon Prime and similar next-day promises. Deliveries that could have been efficiently combined are instead sent instantly, generating more traffic.

B Quite true, but tackling that is a headache. I saw that the chief executive of London buses tried to curb the numbers of delivery vehicles because of fears of gridlock. He realised that, in his building, for example, with 11 floors and 2,500 people working on it, the number of daily deliveries was colossal.

A It's a complex issue! London did get rid of its private cars but is now congested again. Mostly because of the new forms of urbanisation and the revolution of the e-business. Not good for the environment, or for the quality of life for Londoners!

Summary Like many other British cities, London has succeeded in getting rid of private cars in its central part thanks to the congestion charge and people do not expect any more to be able to park in front of the shops. Unfortunately, Central London seems more congested than ever because of the numerous delivery vans and construction vehicles. The city is often in virtual gridlock. Uber, Amazon, next-day delivery as a general rule, are partly responsible for the situation, but the new craze for skyscrapers and new buildings in town centres is also to blame. Buses, although they have become more economical, are gradually losing passengers, and the network has shrunk because of the slow traffic. Rationalising traffic in modern towns is a major problem.

Questions 1 Do you agree with the idea that private cars should be barred from town centres? 2 What is the appeal of living right in the centre of a big city? 3 To what extent is next-day delivery reshaping our way of life? 4 Following the pandemic many people wanted to move out of cities: would you prefer town or country if you had the choice?