

**ESRI**  
**Survey**  
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Number 140, June 2026

  
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# Motivations for car ownership

SHANE TIMMONS, ADAM JOACHIM SHIER AND PETE LUNN



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**NUMBER 140**

Available to download from [www.esri.ie](http://www.esri.ie)

<https://doi.org/10.26504/sustat140>

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Whitaker Square, Sir John Rogerson's Quay, Dublin 2



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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This report was completed as part of a research programme on behavioural science to support sustainable transport modes, funded by the Department of Transport. We are grateful to members of the research programme's steering committee for helpful comments on the study's design and findings.

*This report has been accepted for publication by the Institute, which does not itself take institutional policy positions. It has been peer reviewed prior to publication. The authors are solely responsible for the content and the views expressed.*



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This study investigates how people in Ireland progress into and sometimes out of car ownership, and how these decisions relate to everyday travel behaviour. Using a nationally representative survey of 2,086 people aged 16 and over, we provide the first integrated evidence on the motivations that shape learning to drive, acquiring a first car, adding or shedding household vehicles, and the purposes for which cars are subsequently used. Understanding these behavioural pathways is increasingly important in the context of national ambitions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, alleviate traffic congestion and encourage uptake of more sustainable transport modes.

The findings show that the primary motivation for car ownership is not tied to a specific use but rather the sense of independence it affords. This independence dominates early decisions: it is the most common reason for both learning to drive and getting a first car. Work emerged as a close secondary driver. Two-thirds of respondents linked acquiring a first car to a ‘moment of change’ in their life, most commonly starting a new job. Conversely, decisions to delay learning to drive are largely shaped by material constraints, particularly cost and access to a vehicle, rather than attitudinal factors such as environmental concern. However, alternative transport modes influence this decision. Approximately four-in-ten of those who had not learned to drive or did so after the age of 22 cited availability of alternatives as a primary reason.

For most households, subsequent cars are obtained mainly as replacements, rather than in response to new motivations. The reasons for increasing the number of cars in a household closely mirror those associated with first ownership, with work the most common justification. By contrast, reducing the number of household cars is relatively rare. Among those who have shed a car or are considering doing so, financial pressures and changes in travel needs are the dominant triggers. Environmental motivations, improvements in alternatives, or worsening driving conditions are less influential and more common among those merely contemplating change, rather than those who have actually reduced their car stock.

A comparison of ownership motivations with day-to-day use reveals a notable mismatch. While work is the dominant functional motive for ownership, everyday car trips are most frequently undertaken for short, practical purposes such as shopping and errands. These findings indicate that although households tend to acquire cars to secure flexibility and avoid perceived risks of being without one, a substantial proportion of actual use involves lower-stakes journeys that may be amenable to modal shift.

The results also highlight the structural foundations of car-free living. About half of those without a car cite affordability as the primary barrier, and one-third report having no household driver. A smaller group report that public transport or other options sufficiently meet their needs, implying that improvements in accessibility and service quality may support car-free living for some households.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that car ownership decisions in Ireland are shaped predominantly by the psychological benefit of transport flexibility followed by an economic calculus relating to affordability and work-related need. Policies that rely on information or persuasion alone are therefore likely to have limited impact. Instead, effective demand management strategies will require shifts in the underlying economics by making alternative modes more attractive, reliable and flexible, while recognising that car ownership remains closely tied to access to employment and perceived independence. The findings also imply that emissions reduction initiatives may find greater purchase by prioritising EV uptake, though this will do little for traffic congestion. Although reducing ownership may be challenging, the findings point to opportunities for reducing car use, particularly for short routine trips, and to targeted interventions for households already considering change.

This study provides a foundation for future behavioural research into mobility transitions. These insights can support the development of socially equitable, evidence-based transport policies aligned with Ireland's climate and mobility objectives.

## CHAPTER 1

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### Introduction

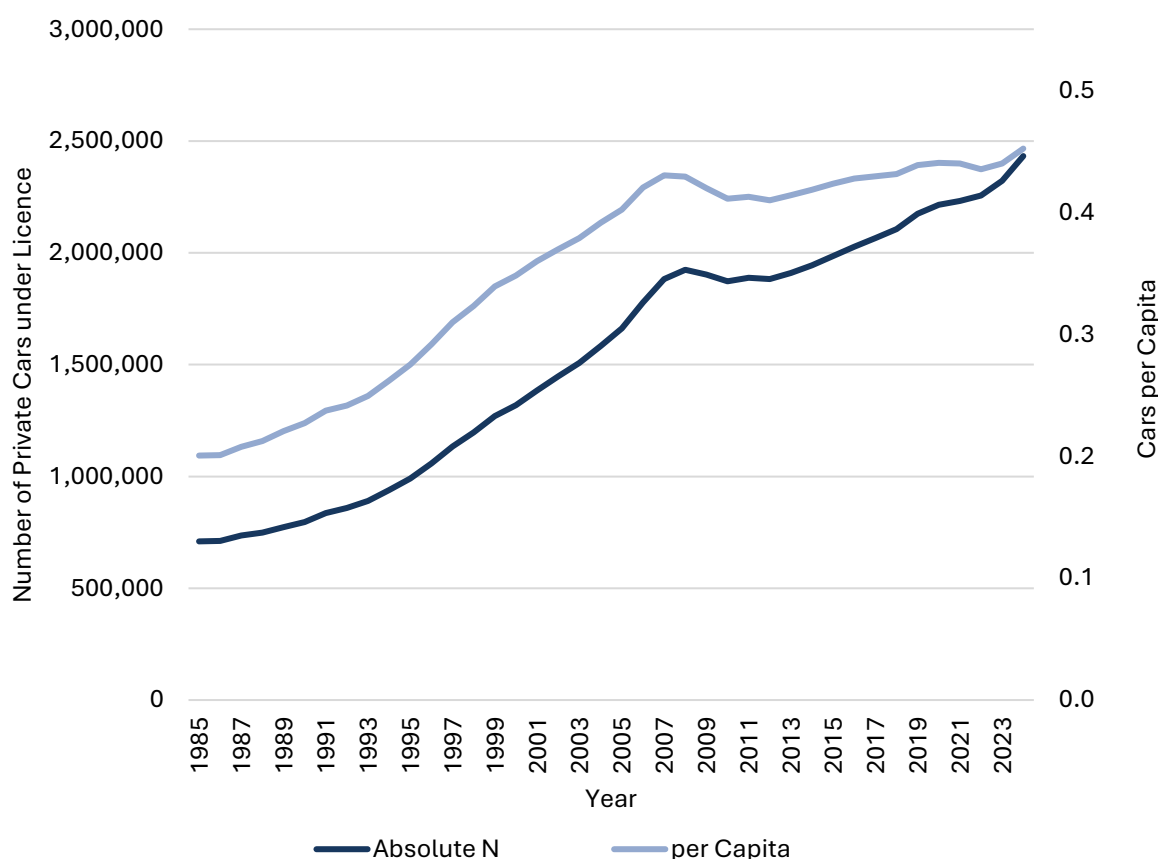
For individuals and households, the decision to own a car carries clear benefits. Cars provide access to employment, education and essential services that would otherwise be difficult to reach, particularly in areas with limited public transport. The decision also matters for governments concerned with transport affordability, decarbonisation and public health. Car use generates environmental, social and economic costs, including greenhouse gas emissions, congestion and negative public health impacts from air pollution, collisions and reduced physical activity. As such, understanding how people make decisions about car ownership has important implications for effective transport policy. The aim of this study is to generate evidence on pathways into and out of car ownership in Ireland.

Importantly, despite the negative externalities of high levels of car use, this report does not take any stance on whether car ownership is, in general, good or bad, or whether individuals should be generally discouraged from owning cars. In many contexts, and especially in rural communities, reductions in car ownership would likely result in economic welfare losses (Carroll et al., 2021). Nonetheless, there are both societal and individual reasons for examining car ownership. From a societal perspective, given evidence of the downsides of car use, many countries are seeking to create conditions where individuals and families are content to own fewer cars or make fewer journeys by car. Meanwhile evidence suggests that many countries, including Ireland, may over-rely on cars for trips that could be undertaken via alternative modes (SEAI, 2024a). Once someone owns a car, use tends to be insensitive to changes in external conditions (Dargay, 2002). In other words, individuals become used to using a car by default for everyday journeys, then are unlikely to change this behaviour even when alternative, more sustainable modes become available, attractive and affordable. This behavioural tendency reinforces the need to understand individual car ownership decisions.

Of particular importance to the context for this study is the challenge of reducing Ireland's greenhouse gas emissions. Transport has the highest energy demand of any sector in the economy (SEAI, 2024b) and is the second largest source of emissions after agriculture (EPA, 2025).

Private internal combustion engine (ICE) vehicles (i.e. petrol and diesel cars) remain the dominant source of the sector’s emissions (SEAI, 2025). Both the absolute number of cars and the number of cars per person have risen steadily since the economic recovery following the 2008 financial crisis (Figure 1.1). Despite targets to halve transport emissions between 2018 and 2030, progress is slow, with reductions of just 5.3 per cent by 2024. Recent Climate Action Plans (2024, 2025) outline strategies to reduce reliance on private cars, through a mix of demand management (e.g. reducing the total car kilometres travelled) and modal shifts (e.g. towards active travel and public transport where feasible). These strategies are underscored by a need to understand the behavioural determinants of how and why households rely on cars.

**FIGURE 1.1 CAR OWNERSHIP TRENDS**



Source: CSO (2013; 2025a; 2025b).

To address this issue, we conducted a survey of a representative sample of over 2,000 people aged 16 years and over to investigate pathways into car use and ongoing ownership decisions. Our survey design was informed by recent evidence reviews on motivations for car

ownership and use (e.g. Soza-Parra and Cats, 2024). Whereas socio-demographic determinants of car ownership, including income, household composition and living area are reasonably well established (e.g., Nolan, 2010), this evidence base points to the importance of behavioural determinants of ownership, particularly autonomy and instrumental needs.

We began by focusing on the decision to learn to drive or to delay doing so. Obtaining a licence is the necessary gateway behaviour with implications for later car acquisition, travel habits and long-term mobility. We also recorded the importance of life events or ‘moments of change’ in acquiring a car, such as changes in working circumstances, relocation and parenthood (Oakil et al., 2016; Whitmarsh et al., 2025). Related literature has reviewed why some households remain car-free, differentiating between those who do so by choice and those who are constrained into doing so (Toy et al., 2025). Accordingly, we explored why households have added or reduced the number of cars they own and distinguished between households that were previously or are currently living car-free. Our survey also allowed us to compare motivations for ownership against reasons for recent driving.

To summarise, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. (a) Why do people learn to drive and get a first car? (b) Why do some people delay learning? (c) What life events are associated with getting a first car?
2. (a) Why do people acquire subsequent cars? (b) How do reasons for car acquisition compare with reasons for daily driving?
3. Why do some households live car-free?
4. (a) Why do households increase the number of cars they own? (b) Why do household decrease the number of cars they own?

## CHAPTER 2

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### Method

The study involved primary data collection using an online interactive survey hosted on Gorilla Experiment Builder (Anwyl-Irvine et al., 2020). The survey included multiple stages, with some sections that will form the basis of other outputs. In this chapter, we describe the participants and the sections of the survey relevant to car ownership decisions. The study received approval from the ESRI Research Ethics Committee on 13 May 2025.

#### 2.1 PARTICIPANTS

2,646 adults were recruited through two market research and polling agencies<sup>1</sup> to be broadly nationally representative by age, gender, region and social grade. Of these, 566 started but did not finish the survey and 80 failed mid-survey quality control checks, giving an attrition rate of 24.4 per cent. This is slightly higher than typical for the study sample frame and likely reflects the length of the survey and involved nature of the questions, including several open-text questions.<sup>2</sup> Participants were paid €4 for completing the 20-minute study, which was run between 4 July and 15 July 2025.

A further 129 16- and 17-year-olds were recruited to complete a modified version of the survey, which was shortened and excluded any open-text box for ethical reasons. The 16- and 17-year-olds were recruited by the market research and polling agencies through their parents/guardians, who first consented to their child participating before the child themselves assented.<sup>3</sup> Of these, 18 started but did not finish the survey and 25 failed mid-survey or post-survey quality control checks,<sup>4</sup> giving an attrition rate of 33.3 per cent.

Thus, the final sample was 2,086 respondents aged 16 and over. Table 2.1 presents the sample characteristics. In the Results section, where descriptive statistics refer to the population (e.g. age at learning to drive), they are weighted to be nationally representative by age, gender,

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.redcresearch.ie/products/red-c-live> and <https://www.pureprofile.com>

<sup>2</sup> Recent studies using the same sampling frame have recorded attrition rates of between 19.4 and 21.9 per cent (Timmons et al., 2026; Timmons, Andersson, Lee and Lunn, 2024).

<sup>3</sup> Those who had multiple 16- or 17-year-olds at home were asked to choose the child who most recently had a birthday.

<sup>4</sup> Fourteen of this sample failed data quality checks and are excluded.

educational attainment and region for those aged 16 to 80, based on the 2022 Census. Descriptive statistics that refer to subgroups (e.g. those living in car-free households) are unweighted, because there are no official estimates of the characteristics of those subgroups for weighting.

**TABLE 2.1 SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS**

		Unweighted Sample	Weighted Sample	CSO Estimate 16–80 years
<b>Gender</b>	Men	45.2	49.0	49.3
	Women	54.8	51.0	50.7
<b>Age</b>	16 to 24 years	10.4	14.8	14.8
	25 to 39 years	32.0	26.0	26.0
	40 to 59 years	34.8	36.9	36.9
	60+ years	22.9	22.3	22.3
<b>Education*</b>	Junior Certificate or below	9.2	18.5	21.0
	Leaving Certificate	35.3	29.3	28.4
	Any Tertiary Education	55.5	52.2	50.6
<b>Region</b>	Dublin	29.0	28.5	28.9
	Leinster	29.0	27.8	27.0
	Munster	25.6	26.5	26.7
	Connacht-Ulster	16.5	17.2	17.4

Source: Authors' analysis and data available on CSO.ie

Note: \*The CSO estimate for educational attainment excludes those who did not report their attainment (i.e. who reported their status as 'other', who did not state a level or who reported being in education without stating the level of education attained), whereas our measure allows those currently in education to state the highest level they have completed. This difference likely explains the discrepancy at lower educational attainment levels. The results we report throughout are not sensitive to education weighting.

## 2.2 SURVEY CONTENT

Participants first provided details about their household composition, including the age of each household member, their relationship to them and who holds a full or learner driving licence. Those who indicated holding a licence themselves were asked the age at which they started learning to drive, the age at which they passed their driving test (if they had) and whether they had ever owned a car, along with the age at which they first did so.

The study then elicited an open text description of this first car as a memory prompt for further questions. This description remained onscreen during the next stage, which focused on reasons for learning

to drive. Participants saw a list of reasons<sup>5</sup> developed from international literature and a small pilot study in which respondents had answered an open-text version of the same question. Participants first selected the main reason they learned to drive, after which that option was removed and the list was re-shown for them to choose the next most important reason. This process was repeated until all options were selected or until participants indicated that no other reasons applied. This process provided ranked reasons for learning to drive. Following this, they were asked whether getting their first car was linked to any of the following major life events: starting college, starting a new job, moving home, having a child or something else.

The next section recorded details on household private vehicles. Participants reported how many cars their household owns and provided details for each, including the make and model, the engine type and year of registration. Once these details were entered, the software displayed a grid showing household members and cars. Participants indicated who owns each vehicle, with the option to select multiple owners per vehicle and multiple vehicles per owner. They could also indicate if any vehicle was a company car.

Follow-up questions focused on the car owned by the participant, if any (or the one they use most often if they own more than one). They were asked if this was the same car they had previously described as their first car. If not, the earlier question on reasons for car ownership was repeated, with the added option of 'replacing another car.'

Participants were then asked when their household most recently added a car. This question was tailored to their circumstances. For example, if they reported their household had two cars, the question clarified that it referred to when they went from having one car to two cars rather than simply replacing a car with a newer one. If the newly added car was different to the ones previously discussed, participants repeated the same questions about reasons for ownership and whether the purchase was linked to any major life events. Participants

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<sup>5</sup> Response options were: lack of alternatives...; having children; parent/guardian(s) wanted me to or gave me one...; friends had started to drive; had the money to (e.g. gift); recreation (e.g. day trips); for work (e.g. commute...) or to get to school; independence (e.g. not relying on others for lifts...); family responsibilities other than children; health reasons (e.g. disability); other (please specify).

who reported having no car in their household were asked to indicate why they lived car-free.

The survey also explored whether households had ever reduced the number of cars they owned. If so, participants described who owned the car that was sold or disposed of and selected applicable reasons for doing so from a list.<sup>6</sup> They were also asked whether they are currently considering reducing the number of cars. If so, they indicated whether they had taken any relevant steps, such as discussing with other household members, looking into other transport options, calculating savings, looking into sale value, or attempting to sell. They then selected reasons for considering a reduction, using a similar list to those who had already reduced their cars but excluding reasons that typically arise unexpectedly (e.g. severe damage to the vehicle). Those who indicated not considering reducing the number of cars in their household were asked to report reasons why. Participants were also asked whether they had considered increasing their number of cars, with a similar checklist of preparatory actions.

The next section of the survey was about recent trips made by car. Participants reported which days over the previous week they had made any trip as a driver of their main car. The software then selected the most recent weekday they had driven and participants completed a short, open-text memory prompt on the trips they had made. They then completed a short diary that recorded for each trip its start and end-point, the purpose and an approximate distance (in kilometres or miles, depending on the participant's preference). For this report, we use only the purpose data.

Other stages of the study, which will be reported in detail separately, included questions about recent public transport use, a vignette experiment and questions on the costs of car ownership. The study concluded with background socio-demographic questions, including whether participants drive as part of their job beyond commuting and whether they typically drive children to school.

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<sup>6</sup> Reasons included: improvements in alternatives (e.g. public transport); household moved home; car was not owned outright...; environmental reasons; car sold as a source of income...; vehicle was severely damaged...; worsening driving conditions (e.g. traffic); fewer people in household; change in licence status of owner...; cost of running/owning car; change in parking availability...; change in travel habits...; change in travel needs (e.g. reduced commute); vehicle failed NCT...; other (please specify).

## 8 | Motivations for car ownership

The survey included a captcha task halfway through, to remove bots and those not paying attention. The task had to be passed in order to complete the survey.

## CHAPTER 3

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### Results

This section presents descriptive statistics relevant to learning to drive and getting a first car, current car ownership and use, and motivations for increasing or reducing the number of household cars.

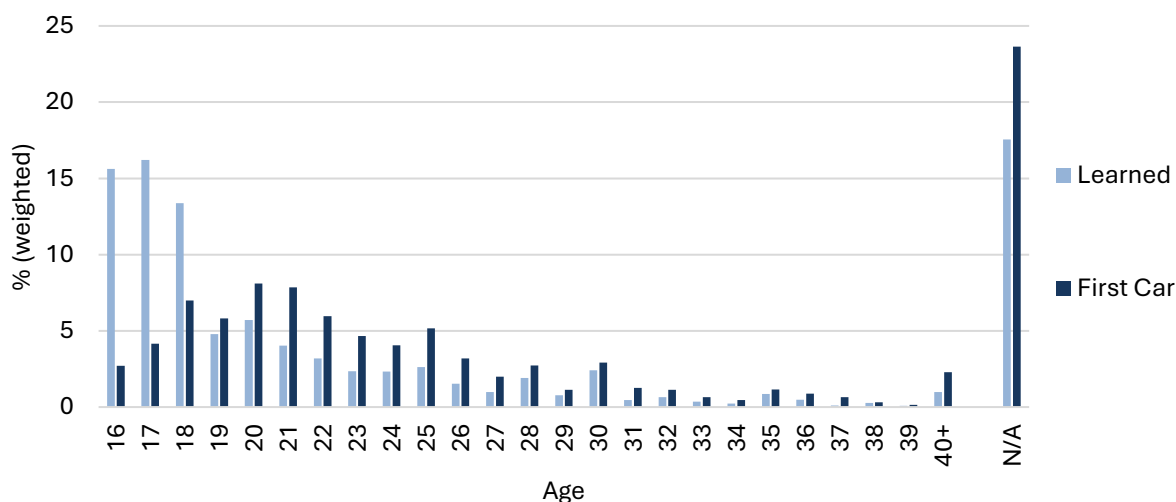
#### 3.1 LEARNING TO DRIVE

Most participants held either a full licence (74.9 per cent) or learner permit (7.6 per cent), leaving 17.6 per cent that had not started learning to drive at the time of the survey. Of those who had learned to drive, the large majority (92.6 per cent) had had at least part ownership of car (76.4 per cent of the full sample). Figure 3.1 shows the distribution of ages at which respondents learned to drive and got their first car. The chart shows that, at age 18, almost half of the sample (45.2 per cent) had begun learning to drive and, at age 22, the proportion had risen to almost two-thirds (63.0 per cent).<sup>7</sup> First car ownership shows an older age distribution. At age 22, 41.6 per cent of the sample had their first car, rising to almost two-thirds of the sample (65.6 per cent) at age 26. The median difference between beginning to learn to drive and getting a first car among those who got one was two years.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Predictors of learning to drive earlier in life, as reported in Timmons, Shier and Lunn (2026), include less access to public transport (or living in a rural area), being a man and lower educational attainment. Timmons et al. (2026) show that the effect of public transport access and gender vary over time, such that there large differences at younger ages that diminish at older ages as more people learn to drive.

<sup>8</sup>  $M = 3.2$  years ( $SD = 4.6$ ).

**FIGURE 3.1 AGE AT LEARNING TO DRIVE AND GETTING A FIRST CAR**

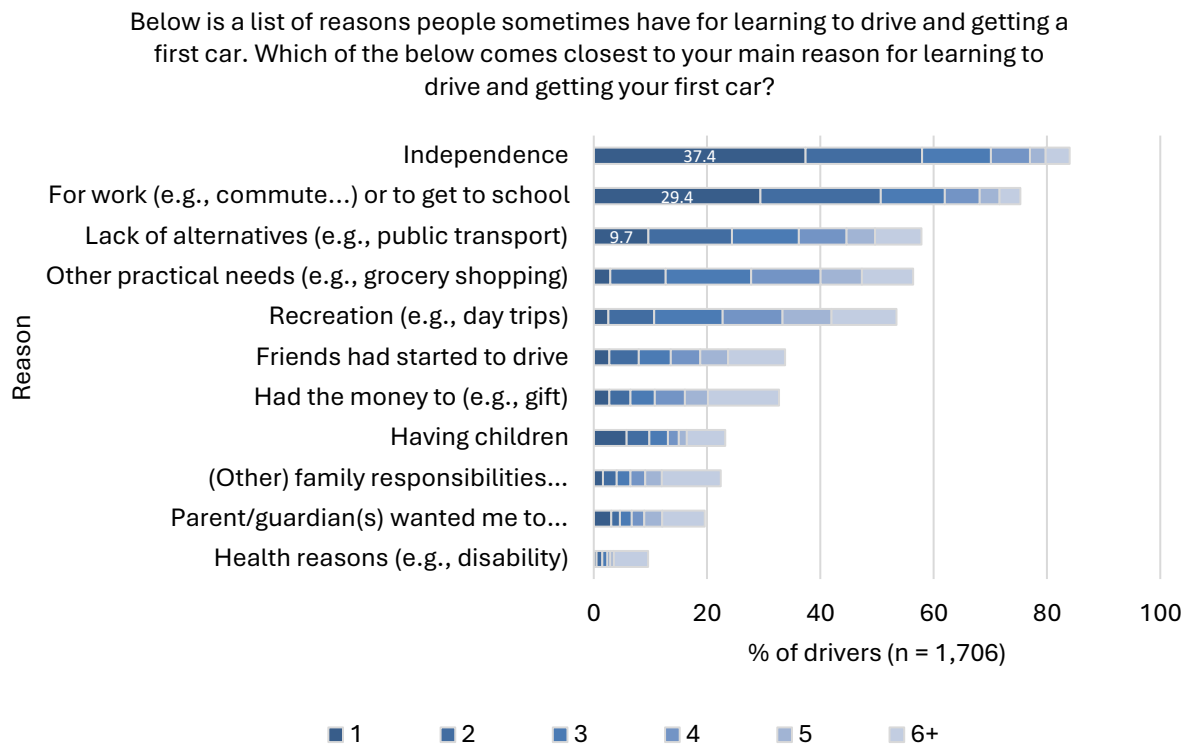
Source: Authors' analysis.

Note: N/A refers to participants who (i) had not learned to drive before completing the survey and (ii) had not acquired a first car before completing the survey.

Figure 3.2 presents the ranked reasons for getting a first car (or learning to drive where relevant). The dominant reason, selected by 84.0 per cent of those asked, was independence. Work or school was the next most commonly selected at 75.3 per cent. There was strong overlap between independence and work as reasons for first car ownership, with 77.7 per cent of those who selected independence also citing work as a reason. Independence was significantly more likely to be selected as the primary reason than any other reason, at 37.4 per cent compared to 29.4 per cent for work.<sup>9</sup>

The majority also selected lack of alternatives (57.9 per cent), other practical reasons (e.g. grocery shopping) (56.4 per cent) and recreation (e.g. day trips) (53.4 per cent), though fewer than 10 per cent selected these as the primary reason for first getting a car.

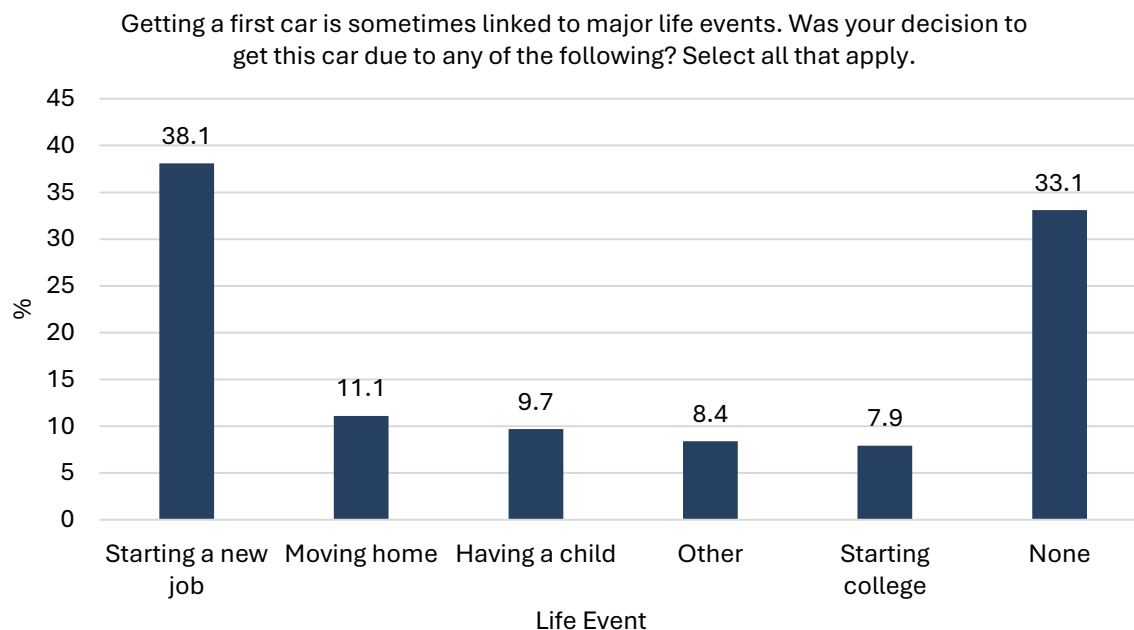
<sup>9</sup> Test of proportions:  $z = 7.01, p < .001$ .

**FIGURE 3.2 RANKED REASONS FOR LEARNING TO DRIVE/GETTING A FIRST CAR**

Source: Authors' analysis.

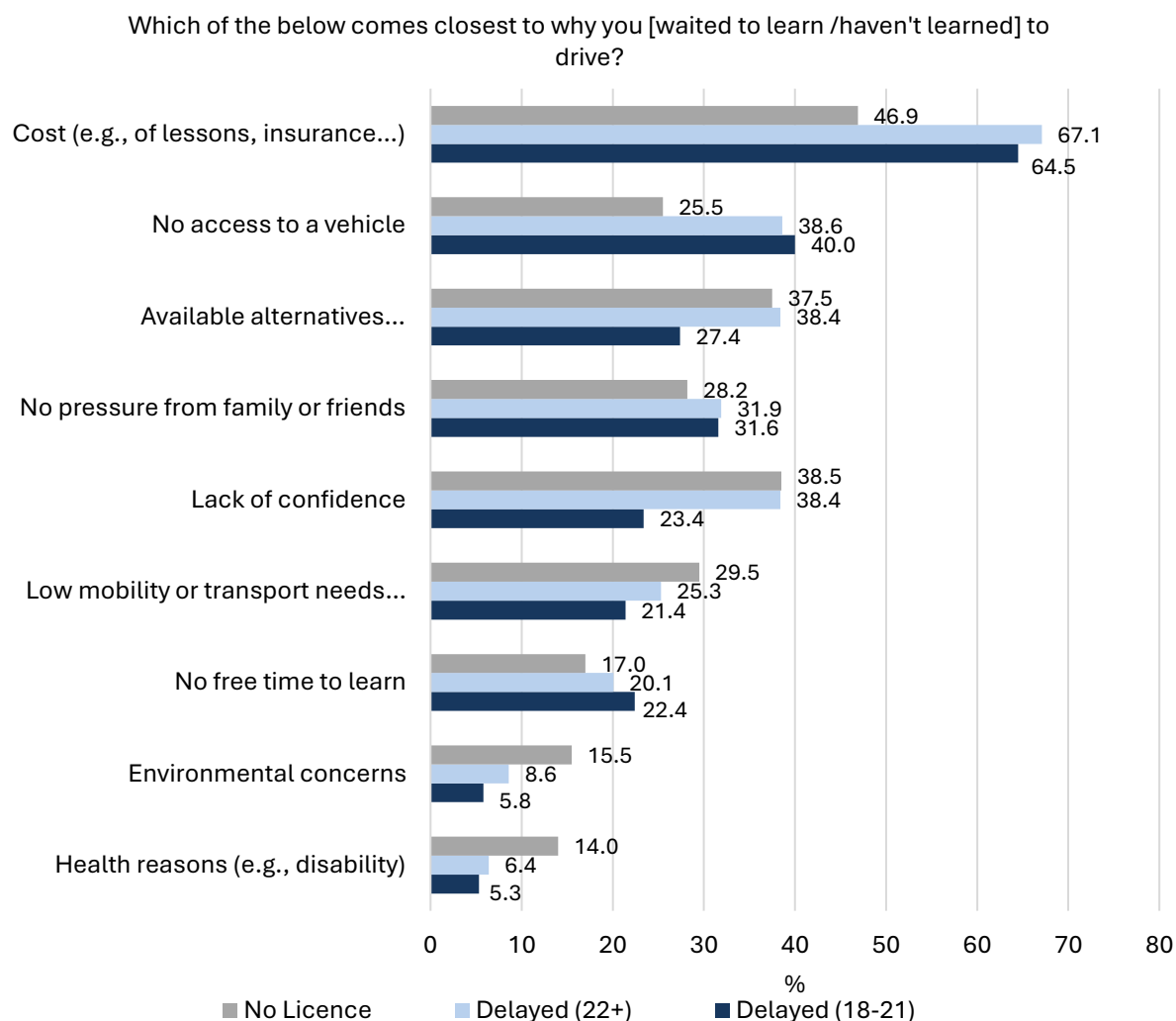
Note: The question repeated after participants selected an initial reason, until they selected that no other reasons applied. These repeat questions give ranks 2, 3 and so on.

Participants were also asked to indicate whether getting a first car was associated with a selection of 'moments of change' in their life (Figure 3.3). The most common moment of change was starting a new job, selected by more than one-in-three of those who had owned a car (38.1 per cent). Otherwise, each specific life event was associated with getting a first car for approximately one-in-ten or fewer participants. Overall, two-thirds of respondents said that getting a first car was linked to a moment of change in their life.

**FIGURE 3.3 'MOMENTS OF CHANGE' AND GETTING A FIRST CAR**

Source: Authors' analysis.

Participants who delayed learning to drive (i.e. learned after age 17;  $n = 1,100$ ) and those who had not yet learned to drive ( $n = 366$ ) were asked to select reasons why. For analysis, we further divided those who delayed learning between those who had begun by age 21 and those who began aged 22 or older. Figure 3.4 shows that the most common reason for all groups was cost (64.5 and 67.1 per cent of those who delayed, respectively, and 46.9 per cent of those who had not learned). The next most common response for delaying was lack of access to a vehicle, arguably also an indicator of cost barriers. Those who had not learned or had begun learning aged 22 or older cited lack of confidence and the availability of alternatives. Environmental concerns were cited by a minority of respondents, though they were cited by approximately twice as many of those who had not learned (15.5 per cent) compared to those who delayed (5.8 per cent among young delayers and 8.6 among older delayers).

**FIGURE 3.4 REASONS FOR DELAYING LEARNING TO DRIVE**

Source: Authors' analysis.

Note: Delayed (18-21) refers to those who did not learn at 17 but began learning aged 18 to 21 years. Delayed (22+) refers to those who had begun learning aged 22 or older.

### 3.2 CURRENT CAR OWNERSHIP

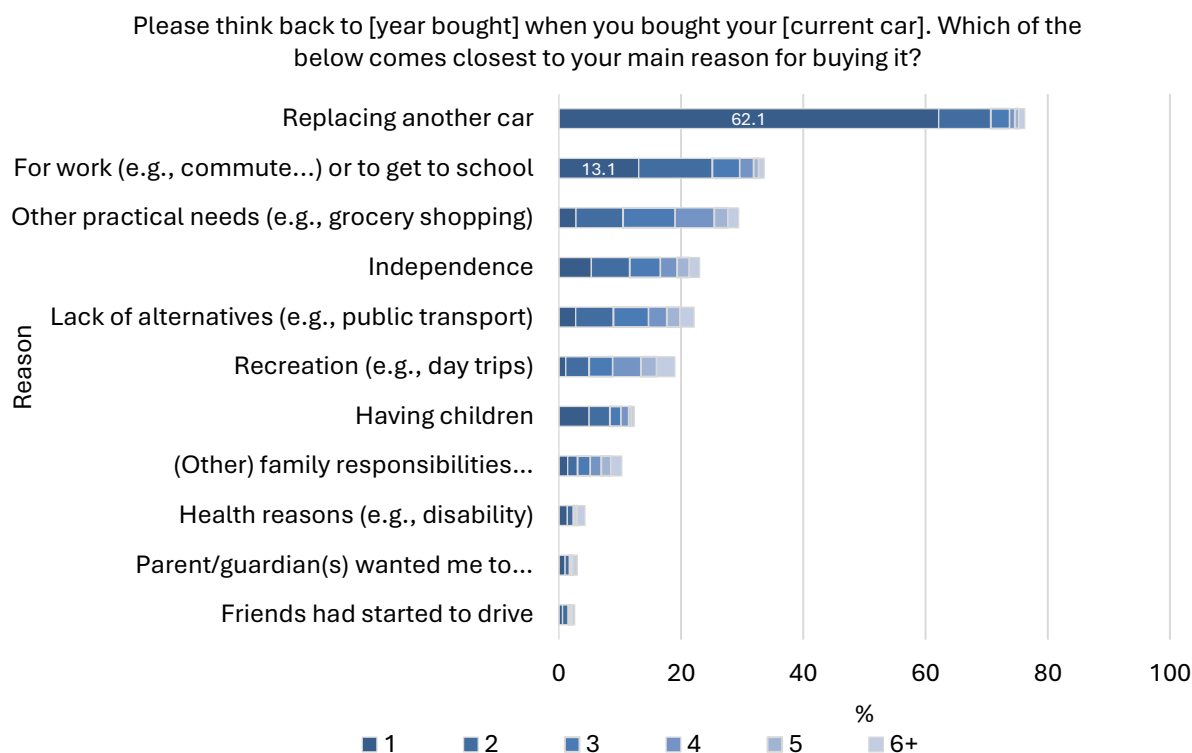
Participants described the number of cars in their household and attributed them to different individuals. Table 3.1 presents a summary of the number of cars in households by the number of people in the household aged 17 or older. The table shows that most households of all sizes have at least one car.

**TABLE 3.1 NUMBER OF CARS IN HOUSEHOLDS OF DIFFERENT SIZES**

	One Adult %	Two Adults %	Three Adults %	Four Adults or More %	All Households %
<b>Zero Cars</b>	29.5	7.8	4.7	10.1	12.0
<b>One Car</b>	63.1	48.0	35.8	20.9	45.0
<b>Two Cars</b>	5.9	41.8	46.6	34.0	34.6
<b>Three Cars</b>	0.9	1.9	11.7	22.2	6.0
<b>Four Cars or More</b>	0.5	0.4	1.2	12.8	2.4
<b>Number of Households</b>	403	1,017	398	73	2,086

Source: Authors' analysis.

Participants who currently owned a car that was not their first ( $n = 1,303$ ) were then asked the same ranking question about the reasons for their current car, including with an option to report that they got it to replace an existing car. Figure 3.5 presents the rankings, showing that three-in-four car owners (76.2 per cent) got their current car to replace their previous one, and for most (62.1 per cent) it was the primary reason. Similar to getting a first car, work emerged as one of the main motivators for getting a car, though it was the primary reason for just 13.1 per cent, and just 5.0 per cent selected work as a reason for their current car only but had not done so for their first car. These results imply that subsequent cars primarily function as replacements with similar motives.

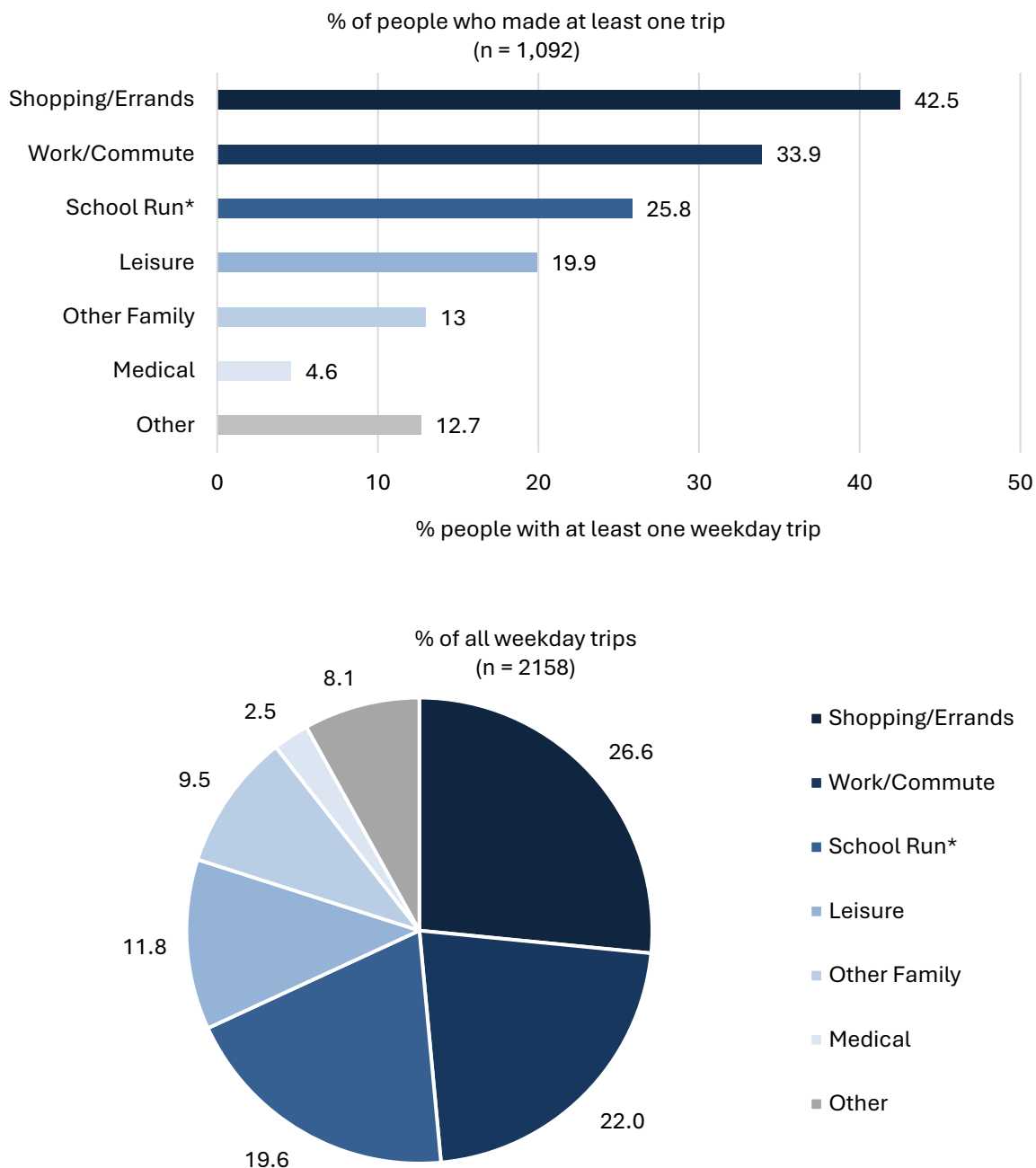
**FIGURE 3.5 RANKED REASONS FOR CURRENT CAR**

Source: Authors' analysis.

### 3.2.1 Reasons for weekday driving

Reasons for initially getting a car can be compared against reasons for everyday driving, as recorded during the driving diary. A total of 1,092 participants had driven on a weekday during the preceding week and completed a diary detailing the trips they had taken. Figure 3.6 shows that the most common reason for driving was for practical needs like shopping and errands (by 42.5 per cent of those who had driven and constituting 26.6 per cent of all trips), though such trips were not a primary motivator of getting a first car (one of the top three ranked reasons by 27.0 per cent; Figure 3.2) or their current car (one of the top three ranked reasons by 19.1 per cent; Figure 3.5). Work was the next most common reason for driving, selected by one-third of all those who had driven and constituting 22.0 per cent of all trips, noting the time of data collection (July 2025) likely means this represents an underestimate of work driving. This is consistent with work being a primary motivator for both first and current car ownership (Figures 3.2 and 3.5).

**FIGURE 3.6 REASONS FOR WEEKDAY DRIVING**



Source: Authors' analysis.

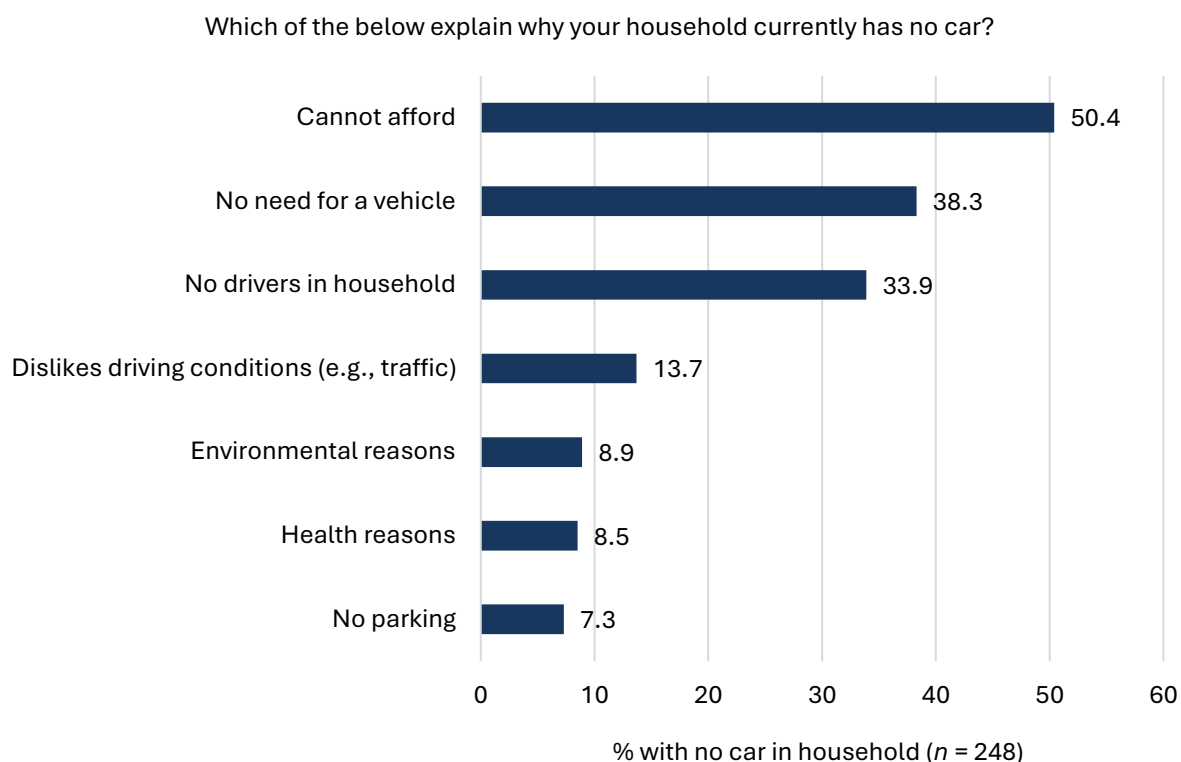
Note: Trips exclude return home journeys. \*Because data were collected during July, the question about school runs was asked separately. Participants reported on the number of days per week they complete a school run, if any. These responses were used to calculate a probability that the respondent would have completed a school run on the day of the diary. This calculation assumes that all other journeys would have been made during school run days.

### 3.2.2 Car-free households

Participants who currently have no car in their household (n = 248) selected reasons for not having a car. Figure 3.7 shows that the most common reason is affordability (50.4 per cent) followed by having no need for a vehicle, including because there are suitable alternatives,

(38.3 per cent) and there being no drivers in the household (33.9 per cent). Few report external disincentives like driving conditions (13.7 per cent) or environmental reasons (8.9 per cent). A follow-up question showed that half (48 per cent) of those who cited affordability as an impediment reported that they would be likely to buy a car if this changed.

**FIGURE 3.7 REASONS FOR NOT HAVING A HOUSEHOLD CAR**



Source: Authors' analysis.

Note: 'Cannot afford' includes 'cannot afford to purchase a car' and 'cannot afford to run a car.' 'No need for a vehicle' includes options that alternatives are sufficient (e.g. public transport, car sharing service). 'No drivers in household' includes someone in the household awaiting a driving test and ineligibility to drive or to be insured.

### 3.3 CHANGING NUMBER OF HOUSEHOLD CARS

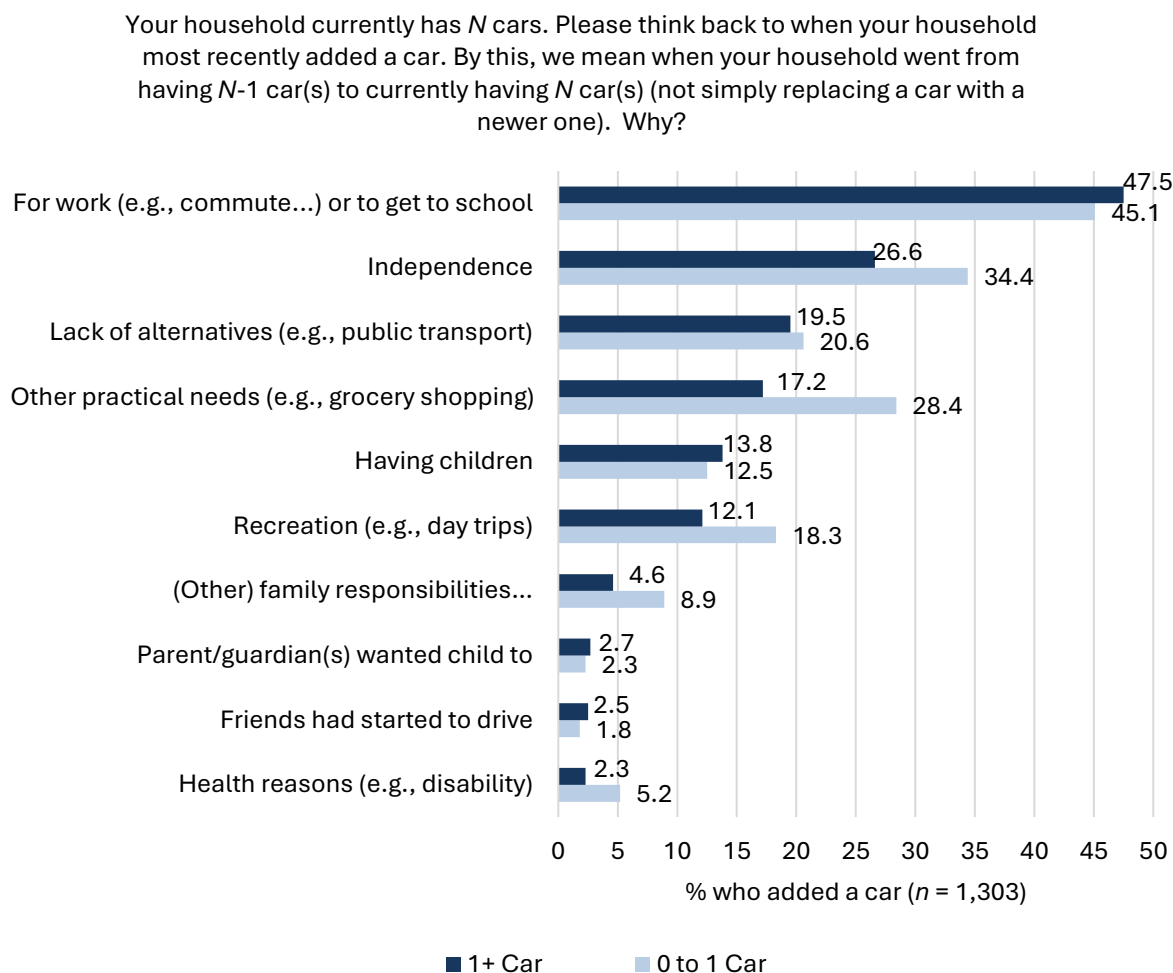
#### 3.3.1 Adding household cars

Participants were asked about when their household most recently added a car (i.e. not simply replacing a car with a new one but increasing the number of cars the household has). Figure 3.8 shows the reasons they reported for doing so, differentiating between households that went from being car-free to having one car ( $n = 553$ ) and those that went from having at least one car to having an additional one ( $n = 483$ ). The chart excludes those for whom this

additional car was the first car they got, as they had already provided the reasons for getting this car.

The chart shows that reasons for adding a car are broadly similar for both households that had no car and those that had at least one existing car. For both types of households, the most commonly selected reason was work. Additional analysis showed that, for 13.0 per cent of households, work was the sole reason for increasing the number of cars they own. Work is followed by independence for both types of households, and other practical needs and lack of alternatives are the third- and fourth-most commonly selected reason for both types of households.

**FIGURE 3.8 REASONS FOR GETTING AN ADDITIONAL CAR**

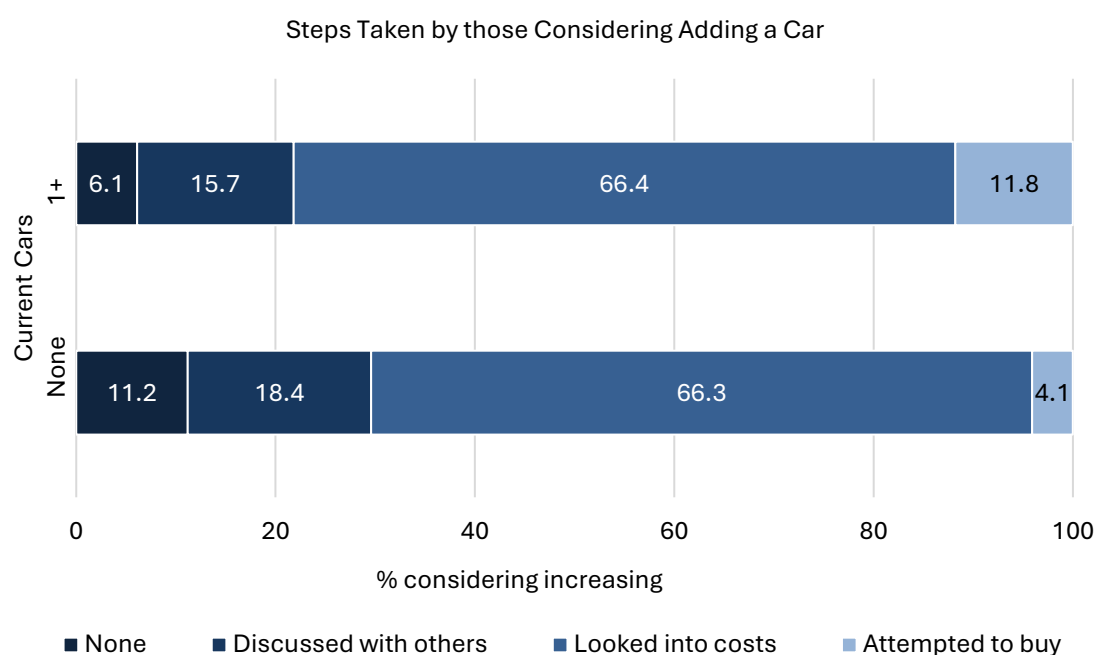


Source: Authors' analysis.

A minority of participants (15.0 per cent;  $n = 313$ ) reported that their household was considering increasing the number of cars they currently own. Within this group, 98 currently live in a household with

no car (40.0 per cent of all car-free households) and the remainder live in a household with at least one car (13.3 per cent of all households with at least one car). Figure 3.9 presents the steps these households have taken, differentiated by these groups. The chart shows that two-thirds of both groups have looked into the costs of an additional household car and the next largest group (between 15.7 and 18.4 per cent) have discussed getting an additional car with others.

**FIGURE 3.9 STEPS TAKEN BY THOSE CONSIDERING ADDING A CAR**



Source: Authors' analysis.

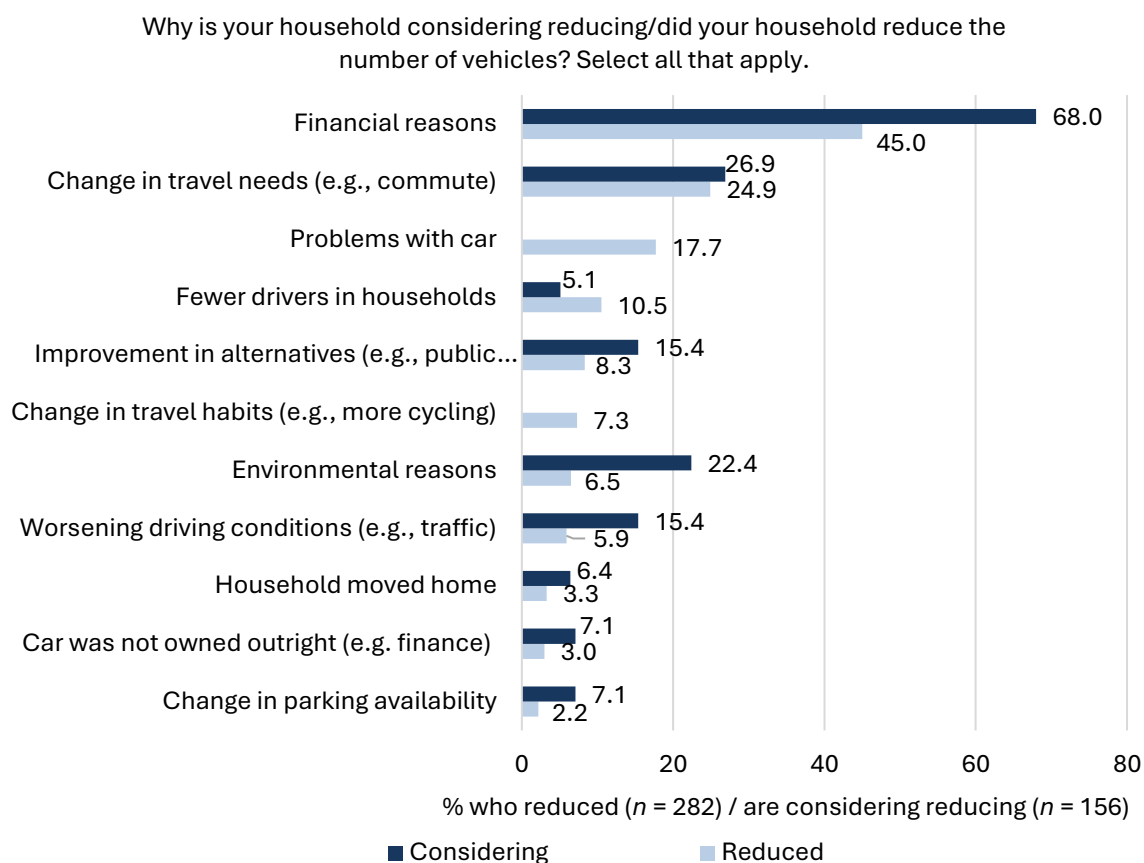
Note: Respondents are coded according to the most progressed step they have taken. For example, those who have discussed with others and looked into the costs are coded only as 'Looked into costs.' Looked into costs covers both the costs of purchasing and the costs of running a car.

### 3.3.2 Reducing the number of household cars

Participants were also asked whether their household had ever reduced its number of cars (i.e. not replaced a car after getting rid of it) or if they are considering reducing the number. A minority had reduced the number of cars they have ( $n = 282$ ; 13.5 per cent of the sample) while a smaller group reported considering reducing the number of cars they have ( $n = 156$ ; 8.9 per cent of car owners). Figure 3.10 presents the reasons they gave for doing so or considering doing so. Almost half of those who reduced the number of cars in the household did so for financial reasons, while over two-thirds of those considering reducing also cited financial reasons. The second most common reason, selected by one-in-four of both types of households, related to travel needs such as a change or reduction in commute.

Environmental reasons, worsening traffic and improvements in alternatives were selected significantly more often by those thinking about reducing than those who have actually done so.<sup>10</sup>

**FIGURE 3.10 REASONS FOR REDUCING NUMBER OF CARS**

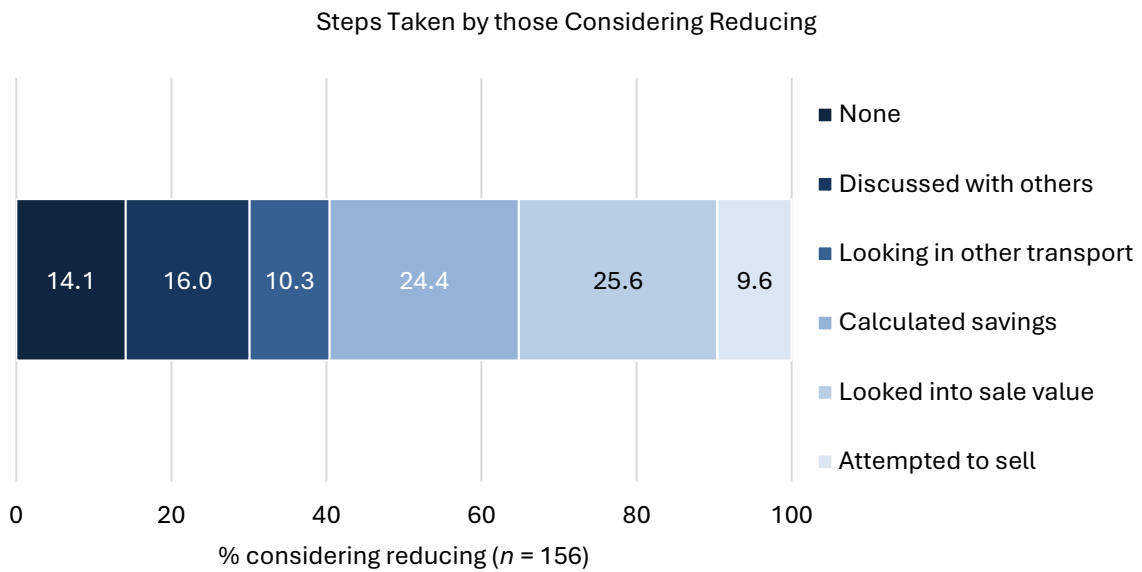


Source: Authors' analysis.

Note: 'Financial reasons' covers both 'cost of running/owning a car' and 'car was sold as a source of income'; Problems with car covers both 'car was severely damaged...' and 'car failed NCT and was not replaced', and these options were not presented to those considering reducing. 'Fewer drivers in household' includes 'fewer people in household' and 'change in licence status of owner', with only the latter shown to those considering reducing. Change in travel habits was not shown to those considering reducing.

Figure 3.11 presents the steps taken by households considering reducing the number of cars they have. The chart shows that only 14.1 per cent had not taken any actions, while over half had at least calculated potential savings.

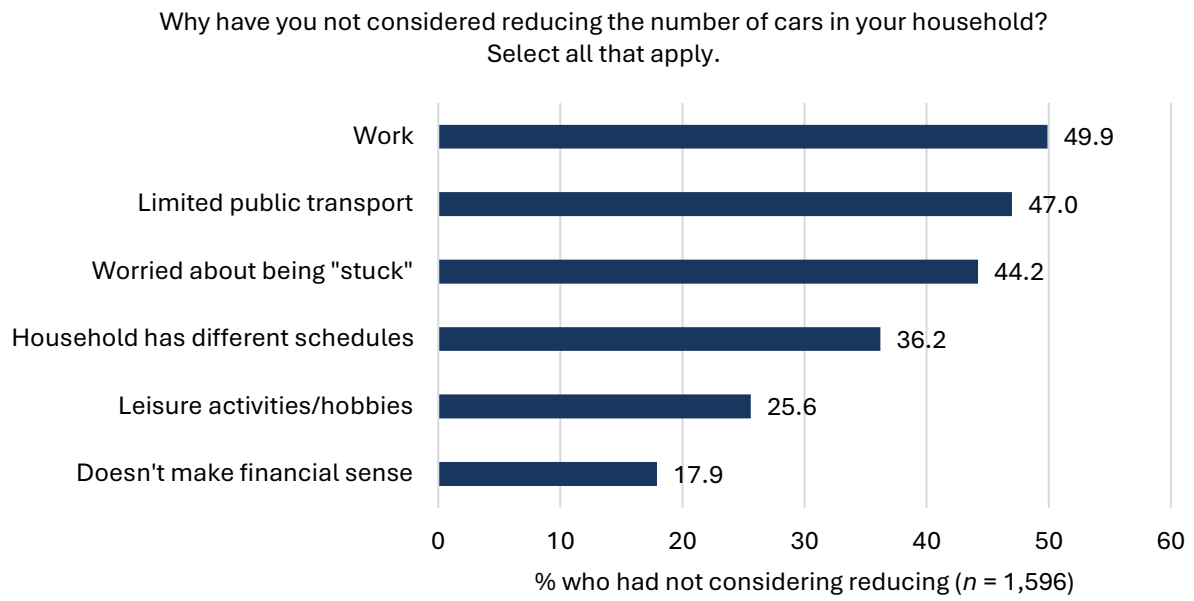
<sup>10</sup> Tests of proportions:  $z = 4.88, p < .001$ ;  $z = 3.28, p = .001$ ;  $z = 2.90, p = .022$ ; respectively.

**FIGURE 3.11 STEPS TAKEN BY THOSE CONSIDERING REDUCING**

Source: Authors' analysis.

The majority of participants have not considered reducing the number of cars in their household ( $n = 1,596$ ; 91.1 per cent of car owners). Figure 3.12 shows the reasons they selected for not thinking about getting rid of a car. The most commonly selected reasons were work, selected by almost half of car owners, limited public transport options and a general worry about being stuck without a car. Fewer than one-in-five car owners reported that it would not make financial sense for them to reduce the number of cars in their household.

**FIGURE 3.12 REASONS FOR NOT CONSIDERING REDUCING**



Source: Authors' analysis.

## CHAPTER 4

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### Discussion

This study provides new evidence on pathways into car ownership and how motivation for ownership aligns with day-to-day driving. The findings highlight the central role of independence and work as motivators for car ownership – though not necessarily use – and the role of cost for those living car-free and considering reducing the numbers of cars in their household. This chapter outlines the implications of these findings and suggests avenues for future research. It begins by considering each car-related decision in turn before drawing larger lessons from findings that are broadly consistent across the different decisions.

#### 4.1 SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

##### 4.1.1 Learning to drive

The results support the view that learning to drive is a rite of passage for many young people. Almost half of participants learned to drive within their first year of eligibility, signalling an expectation of future car ownership among many and indicating that driving remains a strong social norm. Importantly, this decision commonly occurs before major life milestones that might otherwise motivate car ownership, such as full participation in the labour market or becoming a parent. Indeed, for one-third of eventual drivers, learning to drive was not linked to any identifiable life event.

Independence emerged as the primary motivation for learning to drive and acquiring a first car, suggesting that psychological and behavioural drivers play a central role in early car-related decisions (RQ1a). This finding is consistent with international evidence on the importance of ‘non-use’ value of car ownership (Moody et al., 2021). ‘Moments of change’ also appear influential, with two-thirds of people linking car ownership to a major life event (Whitmarsh et al., 2025). Employment in particular is notable as the only life event associated with car ownership for more than 10 per cent of participants. It was also the second-most common motivator overall (RQ1c). This finding reinforces the role of car ownership in supporting both autonomy and access to economic opportunity (Soza-Parra and Cats, 2024). It also presents challenges for policies seeking to reduce ownership rates.

The reasons given for delaying learning to drive further underscore the structural context in which car use develops. Among those who eventually learned to drive, cost was the dominant impediment, followed by lack of access to a vehicle (RQ1b). These are both consistent with material rather than attitudinal barriers. Approximately four-in-ten of those who began learning to drive aged 22 or older cited the availability of alternatives as a reason for delaying. Other work in this research programme analyses the role of public transport provision in the decision to learn to drive in detail (Timmons et al., 2026), supporting the inference that greater access delays the decision to learn to drive, which in turn is associated with lower lifetime driving. However, preferences such as environmental concerns were selected by only a minority. Overall, this pattern suggests that the decision to delay driving is influenced more by opportunity and resource constraints than by pro-sustainability attitudes.

#### **4.1.2 Motivations for acquisition versus use**

Early motivations for driving and car ownership persist over time. The results show that the motivation for subsequent car acquisition is mostly to replace an existing car rather than a new reason (Nolan, 2010). This suggests that the same core motivations of independence and work continue to underpin ownership beyond the first car (RQ2a). The dual motivators of independence and work suggest that interventions aiming to reduce car ownership must address not only the availability of alternative modes but also the perceived risk of losing flexibility.

However, the pattern of day-to-day driving contrasts with stated reasons for car acquisition and highlights alternative opportunities. Weekday travel appears most often to function for practical trips such as shopping and errands (RQ2b). These journeys are likely to fall within shorter distance bands (SEAI, 2024a), suggesting a mismatch between high-stakes reasons used to motivate ownership and lower-stakes nature of everyday use. This tension is further amplified by evidence that households tend to underestimate the full economic costs of car ownership and use, potentially obscuring the relatively high cost of undertaking routine, short trips (Shier, Timmons and Lunn, 2026). Correcting these misperceptions may therefore strengthen the case for reducing use on financial as well as practical grounds, highlighting that many everyday journeys are disproportionately costly relative to their purpose.

This gap between perceived need and actual use implies that reducing use may be more achievable than reducing ownership rates. Interventions that target short, routine trips may therefore represent more effective demand management strategies, even among households that continue to own one or more cars (e.g., Maibach, Steg and Anable, 2009).

#### **4.1.3 Car-free households**

Most car-free households appear to be constrained rather than living without a car as a proactive choice (Toy et al., 2025). Affordability was cited by half of respondents and the absence of a driver in the household by one-third (RQ3). However, more than one-third also indicated that available alternatives meant they had limited need for a vehicle, suggesting improvements in local accessibility or transport services may enable some households to forgo car ownership. That said, only a minority reported preference-based motivations (e.g. environmental concerns) for living car-free, consistent with international evidence that car-free living is typically driven by structural or economic factors rather than pro-environmental preferences.

If the policy goal is to reduce car ownership, existing research shows that car-free-by-choice households tend to be concentrated in areas with strong local accessibility and well-connected urban environments (Toy et al., 2025). This suggests that underlying structural conditions, such as reliable public transport, walkable neighbourhoods and safe cycling infrastructure are likely to be prerequisites for behavioural change interventions to be effective. These implications align with broader strategies in recent Climate Action Plans.

#### **4.1.4 Adding and reducing cars**

The factors associated with adding cars to a household closely mirror the motivations for acquiring a first car. Work is the most common reason among both households moving from zero to one car and those already owning at least one, with independence ranked second for both groups (RQ4a). These findings suggest that additional cars are often acquired to meet instrumental needs linked to employment and personal autonomy. They may also reflect challenges such as conflicting schedules, dispersed employment locations or limited

transport alternatives. Household-level coordination is an under-researched problem that may deserve further attention.

By contrast, reducing the number of household cars was relatively rare and the vast majority of car owners had not considering doing so, reinforcing the view that car ownership is ‘sticky’ (Dargay, 2002). Car shedding was most commonly triggered by financial pressures or changes in travel needs such as reduced commuting, suggesting that strong external prompts are required before households give up a vehicle (RQ4b). Again, work was cited as a primary motivator for ownership, with it being the main reason that households have not considered getting rid of a car. A sizeable share also expressed concern about being ‘stuck’ without a car, highlighting the non-use value households place on access even if day-to-day needs are limited.

Among the smaller group who have considered selling a car they currently own, financial reasons overwhelmingly dominated. Importantly, these households were not merely contemplating the idea: most had already taken concrete steps such as calculating potential cost savings. This suggests that targeted interventions, such as clearer cost information, may meaningfully assist the small proportion of households already thinking about reducing their car ownership.

#### **4.1.5 Economic drivers of car ownership and use**

Looking across the multiple decisions investigated in this study, the findings point to a general conclusion that carries important policy implications. Overwhelmingly, people’s stated reasoning when it comes to learning to drive, buying a first car, adding a second (or additional) car, or considering reducing the number of cars in the household, is based on a narrow economic cost-benefit analysis. In this analysis, most drivers underestimate the costs (Shier et al., 2026). Matters of environmental concern or lifestyle preferences do not feature, except among a small minority. Some caution is always warranted when interpreting stated reasons for decisions, which may depart from actual reasons. For instance, people may be unaware of the extent to which they are influenced by social norms or by loss aversion. People generally like to think of themselves as rational independent decision-makers and will describe their own decision-making in this way. However, in the present survey, when presented

with multiple rationales for their decisions regarding car ownership and use, the perceived trade-off between affordability and need predominated.

This general finding has two implications. It suggests that any policy that relies on communication and social marketing to limit car ownership and use for the sake of reducing pollution, congestion and other negative externalities is likely to have at best marginal effects. It implies that, to be successful, an intervention has to alter the basic economic calculus. In other words, a successful intervention would need to make car ownership and driving substantially more expensive or less convenient or make alternative transport modes substantially cheaper and more convenient, or both. However, there are two caveats to this implication. The first is that it assumes awareness and understanding of the negative externalities of car use. The second is that the public holds significant misperceptions about the costs of transport modes (Shier et al., 2026). Correcting these misperceptions, if achievable, could also alter the underlying economic decisions and hence outcomes.

The second implication is that in the absence of a change to the basic economics of car ownership, further economic growth in coming years is going to see further growth in car ownership, in particular the proportion of households owning more than one car. As this study shows, ownership results in many shorter journeys being undertaken by car. The consequences of this for environmental outcomes and congestion are obvious. From the perspective of emissions, however, continued strong growth in car ownership places greater emphasis on the need for policy to increase the proportion of environmentally-friendly vehicles, especially EVs, by a substantive amount.

## **4.2 AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

These findings point to several promising directions for future research to deepen understanding of car ownership pathways and support demand management and modal shift policy.

The results suggest that early decisions may set individuals on car-dependent mobility trajectories. Related research from this research programme shows that public transport availability influences the timing of likelihood of learning to drive and that delayed learning to

drive is associated with driving less later in life (Timmons et al., 2026). Future research that investigates ways to encourage sustainable travel habits during early adulthood may thus generate substantial long-run benefits.

Independence emerged as a dominant motivator for both learning to drive and owning a car. A valuable question for future research is whether the autonomy afforded by alternative modes like public transport, cycling or shared mobility is accurately perceived, or whether such systems can be altered to boost independence (e.g. with later-running services). Understanding the psychological dimensions of independence in mobility and how non-car modes might satisfy them could help inform more effective behavioural and communication strategies.

After independence, work consistently appears as a major driver of car ownership and use. Future research could examine whether opportunities exist to reduce car reliance for commuting without compromising access to employment. This might include identifying commutes that are realistically shiftable to alternative modes, evaluating employer-led mobility programmes or encouraging sustained use of hybrid and remote working arrangements.

Finally, cost is a recurring theme across several findings. It acts as a barrier to learning to drive, a constraint on car-free households and a primary motivator for shedding a vehicle or thinking about doing so. Yet there is evidence that households may underestimate the total cost of owning and operating a car (Andor et al., 2020). Other research from this research programme highlights widespread and substantial misperceptions of these costs (Shier et al., 2026). Future research on the factors that shape these perceptions and whether interventions, such as personalised cost calculators or clearer cost-of-ownership information, may help support more informed decision-making.

### **4.3 CONCLUSION**

This study provides new evidence on the pathways through which people in Ireland learn to drive, acquire cars, add or shed vehicles, and use them in everyday life. The findings highlight the central roles of independence and work in motivating and sustaining car ownership. They also show that delayed learning to drive and car-free living are

predominantly shaped by structural and economic constraints rather than preferences. Together, these insights suggest that effective demand-management strategies must look beyond individual attitudes and focus on the economic conditions that shape mobility choices, such as accessibility of alternatives, work-related travel demands, and households' need for flexibility. Thus, any policy designed to make substantive changes to car ownership and use needs to make motoring more expensive and less convenient, make alternative modes less expensive and more convenient, or at least generate sharply different perceptions of the relative costs and benefits of transport modes. While reducing ownership may remain challenging, particularly where cars support economic participation, the results point to some opportunities for modest reductions in car use, especially for short routine trips, and to support households already considering change. Continued research on behavioural mechanisms can inform policies that are both socially equitable and aligned with Ireland's climate and transport objectives.

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