

How Sadiq Khan made London into a taxi driver's worst nightmare

Hackney carriage drivers say speed restrictions and traffic schemes in the capital are an existential threat to the black cab

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Frank O'Beirne, who has been a black cab driver for 14 years, says that taxis 'need to be moving to actually have decent fares'

It should be a straightforward journey that needn't take too long – Liverpool Street to London Bridge station, two areas heavily populated with white-collar workers heading from the commuter belts into the capital for their careers.

However, those opting to drive the short one-and-a-half miles find themselves forced to go a more roundabout way – through Whitechapel, in order to avoid the bus gate at Bishopsgate, which prevents motorists (yet allows buses and bikes) from accessing the road.

So, instead of taking around five minutes in the car, it takes between 20 and 30 minutes. Realistically, it would be quicker for drivers to swap four wheels for two legs.

Bishopsgate is just one of the many roads in the capital that have become increasingly unwelcoming to motorists, with a recent survey conducted by TomTom, the satnav company, finding that London is the slowest-driving capital city in the world. It takes an average of three minutes and 38 seconds to travel one measly kilometre (0.6 miles) in the centre of the city. The analysis also found drivers lost an average of 141 hours stuck in rush hour traffic in 2025.

This glacial pace is annoying when you are trying to get somewhere in a hurry, to attend an important meeting, perhaps, or to make it to the theatre before curtain call. However, for the black cab drivers of London, increasingly congested, slow and difficult-to-navigate roads are leading to a significant loss of earnings, and even putting their livelihoods – and the sight of the London icon – at risk of extinction. As of late 2025, the number of licensed drivers had fallen to around 14,800, down from more than 22,500 a decade earlier.



The number of licensed black taxi drivers in London is rapidly depleting Credit: Jonathan Kellerman

For Steve Cox, who became a black cab driver in 2022, navigating the streets of London has become increasingly difficult. He cites low-traffic neighbourhoods (LTNs) – areas where roads are closed to traffic to allow cyclists and pedestrians to take priority – as one of the main contributors to the capital’s slow roads.

“What used to be a 15-minute journey can now take you up to an hour,” the 54-year-old explains. “Tottenham Court Road is severely restricted for motorists between 8am and 7pm, which are some of your peak hours as a black cab.

“If you want to go from one side of Tottenham Court Road to the other to drop a passenger, we have to do two different squares and go round several back roads. It’s just ridiculous.

“It’s another 15 to 20 minutes on the journey time, and probably another £15-£20 for the customer. I’m embarrassed to charge them. It’s unfair and leads to complaints that aren’t down to me – and results in fewer people trying to flag us down.”

While LTNs were initially implemented in London in the 1970s (although under a different name) to filter traffic in the Hackney area, they were implemented en masse in March 2020 under Mayor of London Sir Sadiq Khan’s plans to improve road safety, decrease air and noise pollution, and encourage “active travel” such as walking and cycling.

Now, it is thought four per cent of London’s nine-million-strong population lives in an LTN.



London Mayor Sadiq Khan introduced a number of low traffic neighbourhoods (LTNs) to London in 2020 Credit: Richard Baker

These have made navigating around the capital increasingly problematic; approximately 95 per cent of black cab drivers report that LTNs and poor road conditions make picking up and dropping off passengers difficult.

Cabbies also cite London’s new speed restrictions as a reason why the capital often remains at a standstill. According to Transport for London (TfL), more than half of London’s roads now have a 20mph limit. This includes all roads within London’s Congestion Charge zone, as well as major roads, such as the A107 corridor and the White Hart Roundabout.

While this was implemented to try and cut deaths and serious injuries, City Hall was previously told this change was “devastating to the taxi industry” by Steve McNamara, general secretary of the Licensed Taxi Drivers Association in 2024.

“I understand the need for 20mph zones around schools,” says Frank O’Beirne, who has been a black cab driver for 14 years. “However, places like Park Lane, which have been reduced from three lanes of traffic to just one in order for there to be a bus and cycling lane, is just madness – especially now we’re stuck only being able to go 20mph there.”

The 50-year-old adds: “While our meters do go up in traffic, it’s only incremental – we need to be moving to actually have decent fares. Customers get so fed up in traffic they just jump out.”



Frank O’Beirne describes Park Lane as ‘madness’ for cab drivers Credit: Jeff Gilbert

Sadiq Khan’s green crusade for London has reached a nadir with the highly criticised and controversial ultra-low emission zone (Ulez). Since 2018, all newly-licenced black

cabs need to be “zero-emission capable”, while the maximum operating age for older, more polluting diesel taxis has been reduced from 15 years to 12.

Cox says some older cabbies have been forced into an early retirement. “I know men in their 60s who have had their cab for 10 years and just didn’t see the point of carrying on investing so much money in a new car, and have gone and got jobs in Tesco instead. “That and the stress of trying to earn enough money to keep you afloat is enough to push someone into another job. I don’t blame people for saying: ‘I don’t need this anymore.’”

It’s of little surprise, then, that a quarter of all black cabs on the roads before the pandemic are no longer in operation. Renting a traditional black cab, or Hackney carriage, is not cheap. Cox pays £360 a week to rent his vehicle, while others pay £400 and beyond. That doesn’t include the additional outgoings for cabbies, such as the mandatory two MOTs a year; while cab drivers don’t pay this, it does result in a loss of earnings as you can’t work while your vehicle is being serviced.

Cox says he needs to earn more than £3,000 a month just to break even on the investments he’s made to become a black cab driver. “It’s a stressful trade,” he says. “It’s made even more stressful by sudden roadworks, or ongoing protests by groups such as [Palestine Action blocking roads](#). I can lose up to £300 a day in earnings when protests take place.”

Those still working as black cab drivers are now finding alternative methods to keep themselves afloat. O’Beirne works as a tour guide during slow periods. “I prefer doing out-of-town stuff now, because London just drives me mad,” he says. “Places like Tottenham Court Road, Mayfair, the City are just no-go areas. It’s a nightmare to navigate.

“Corporate gigs tend to pay better – I get a lot of American customers, who tend to be big tippers. But doing these gigs means you give up some freedom of setting your own hours, which is partly the beauty of doing this job.”

So, what could help London’s black cab drivers stay on the roads? For Cox, cutting, or at least reducing, some of the restrictions of LTNs on Hackney carriages would help with picking up and dropping off customers.

“If we really want to ease congestion, we could put a cap on private-hire drivers,” he adds. “They can operate without any restriction on the size of their fleet. I’ve heard of private-hire drivers getting licensed in Wolverhampton and then driving down here to get more work.”

Currently, private-hire vehicles vastly outstrip black cabs; TfL estimates more than 106,000 of these cabs are on the road.

Meanwhile, Steve Kenton, who has been a cabbie for 35 years, believes City Hall should listen more to black cab drivers. “We have some wonderful and intelligent people who choose to become black cab drivers,” he says. “We spend three to four years perfecting the Knowledge of London so we know the proper routes around the city. We attract individuals from every demographic. Our views and concerns deserve to be treated with more respect.”

“Fundamentally, if our wheels aren’t moving, we aren’t making money,” O’Beirne agrees. “We’re the only fully accessible transport network in London. Not everyone can ride a bike.”

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