Fifteen-Minute Prisons? A Reflection on the Far-Right Backlash Against Sustainable Development in Britain

Garrett L. Grainger

In an era of increasing political polarization, right-wing activists are targeting sustainable planning initiatives. Analyzing online media coverage and posts on X (formerly Twitter), Garrett L. Grainger explores why activists are contesting "15-minute cities" in Oxfordshire and how resistance to them reaches across the globe and affects local planning efforts.

Nearly 2,000 far-right activists protested Oxfordshire County Council's "15-minute city" plan in February 2023. That demonstration inspired an international backlash against 15-minute cities and sustainable development. This essay presents archival data from 210 online news articles and a cross-section of 52,168 tweets from early April 2023 to answer three questions: Why are far-right groups opposing 15-minute cities? How is resistance against 15-minute cities diffusing across the globe? What impact(s) are far-right groups having on local planning systems?

What is a 15-minute city?

The 15-minute city[1] is an urban design concept that achieves sustainable development through compact growth. Its premise is people should be able to live, work, shop, and play within a short walk from their home.

Advocates claim[2] and allowing for more green space; encourage active forms of travel (bicycling, walking, wheeling, and scootering) that improve the health of residents; strengthen community bonds by promoting local consumption and giving residents more opportunities to interact with one another; and reduce various types of pollution that undermine quality of life.

The World Economic Forum (WEF) promotes 15-minute cities[3] through its "Great Reset" initiative. Although Covid-19 tragically killed millions, the WEF is defining the post-pandemic recovery as an opportunity[4] to facilitate green transitions. Covid-19 lockdowns reduced carbon emissions by forcing people to live in something like a 15-minute city. To advance the climate agenda, the WEF is encouraging governments around the world to create 15-minute cities as they economically recover from Covid-19.

The 15-minute city concept suits British towns and cities because most were built before the automobile was invented. It is therefore unsurprising that many British local governments are using the 15-minute concept[5] to achieve net zero through their planning systems.

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[1] See: www.rtpi.org.uk/find-your-rtpi/rtpi-english-regions/rtpi-london/latest-updates/15-minute-cities20-minute-neighbourhoods.

[2] See: www.c40knowledgehub.org/s/article/Why-every-city-can-benefit-from-a-15-minute-city-vision?language=en_US.

[3] See: www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/06/covid19-great-reset-gita-gopinath-jennifer-morgan-sharan-burrow-climate.

[4] See: www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/03/15-minute-city-stickiness.

[5] See, for example: www.itv.com/news/2023-02-20/what-is-a-15-minute-city-and-why-is-the-idea-so-controversial.

Why is the far right attacking 15-minute cities?

Far-right groups are using a "populist frame" to attack 15-minute cities. A "frame" is the way social movements define problems, propose solutions, and motivate action (Snow and Benford 1988). A populist frame blames the "people's" grievances on an "elite" (Aslanidis 2016). The far right derives its populist frame from an authoritarian ideology that defines the ruling class as an oppressive technocratic elite and the people as a socially homogeneous interest group that is oppressed by elites (Sager 2020). This supports demagogues who disenfranchise minority groups and sabotage liberal institutions.

Britain's far right uses this frame to interpret 15-minute cities and recruit residents into their movement. Not Our Future (NOF) is a far-right organization spearheading opposition to 15-minute city plans. It defines the "elites"[6] as governments creating a "dystopian" future through sustainable development. Like the rest of the far right, NOF demonizes multilateral groups like the WEF as "globalist" organizations that "force" local governments to implement things like 15-minute cities. Britain's far right expands this definition to include "sub-elites" such as "Big Tech,"[7] "mainstream" media,[8] Left politicians,[9] and academics[10] who supposedly help globalists create 15-minute cities.

"The people" is the protagonist[11] in the far right's 15-minute city frame. This moral "majority" is the so-called "victim" of elite oppression. Britain's far right narrowly defines the people as heterosexual[12] motorists who belong to a nuclear family.[13] Far-right pundits also "class"[14] this protagonist by problematizing 15-minute city plans for "working-class" households. This construction negates the interests of LGBT+ populations, active travelers, single households, and white-collar workers in disputes over local transport policy.

The far right problematizes 15-minute cities in two ways. First, they criticize "undemocratic" processes[15] that produced 15-minute city plans. Despite public consultations and policy changes[16] to accommodate resident concerns, the far right has blasted councils for marginalizing the people's interests. Doing so uses the idea of democracy to conceptualize residents as the victim of elite oppression who *should* feel offended by 15-minute cities.

Second, the far right has associated 15-minute cities with "undemocratic" impacts. They interpret Covid-19 lockdowns as the pretext for "climate lockdowns"[17] that 15-minute cities are said to create. The far right warns 15-minute cities will expand state surveillance[18] and enable governments to restrict the movement of residents. Some consequently associate 15-minute cities with communism,[19] Nazism,[20] and the *Hunger Games*.[21] While it is important to question the surveillance capacity of local government and demand protection against abuse, it is not true that 15-minute

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6   See: https://notourfuture.org.

7   See, for example: www.thejournal.ie/15-minute-city-conspiracy-theory-ireland-6000851-Feb2023.

8   See: https://notourfuture.org/bbc-cover-the-oxford-leaflet-drop-in-their-usual-way.

9   See, for example: www.spiked-online.com/2022/10/25/the-madness-of-the-15-minute-city.

10   See, for example: www.thecourier.co.uk/fp/opinion/4400113/20-minute-neighbourhood-steve-finan.

11   See, for example: www.oxfordstudent.com/2023/01/25/15-minute-city-plans-cause-controversy.

12   See, for example: https://notourfuture.org.

13   See, for example: https://notourfuture.org/oxford-leaflet-finalised.

14   See, for example: www.spiked-online.com/2023/02/23/its-true-the-climate-fanatics-are-coming-for-your-car.

15   See, for example: www.rebelnews.com/thetford_20_minute_neighbourhoods.

16   See, for example: https://news.oxfordshire.gov.uk/joint-statement-from-oxfordshire-county-council-and-oxford-city-council-on-oxfords-traffic-filters.

17   See, for example: www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-03-02/how-did-the-15-minute-city-get-tangled-up-in-a-far-right-conspiracy.

18   See, for example: www.ntd.com/5-arrested-after-large-scale-protest-against-15-minute-cities-in-oxford-england_902671.html.

19   See, for example: www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/feb/16/15-minute-city-planning-theory-conspiracists.
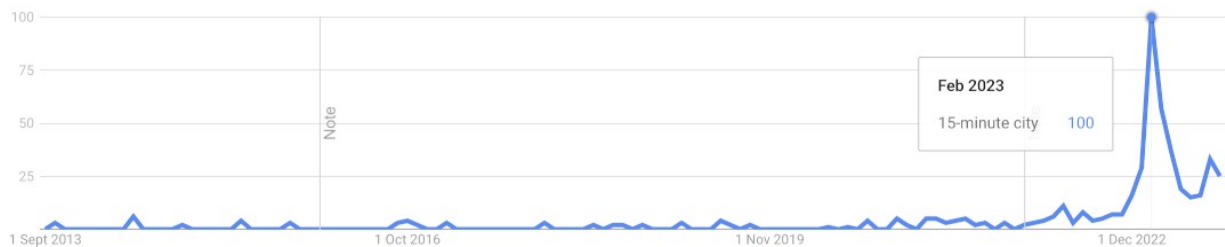
20   See, for example: www.wired.co.uk/article/15-minute-cities-conspiracy-climate-denier.

cities create an Orwellian dystopia because residents can freely travel on public transit, bicycle, scooter, or foot.

How is the far right diffusing its backlash against 15-minute cities?

The backlash against 15-minute cities quickly spread across the Anglophone world. Figure 1 presents data from Google Trends about user searches for the term "15-minute city" from September 2013 to September 2023. The graph shows peak interest in February 2023 when the far right protested Oxfordshire's spatial plan.[22] This suggests Britain's far right has been able to use Oxfordshire as symbol of resistance against 15-minute cities.

Figure 1. A time-series graph of Google searches for the term "15-minute city" by users across the globe (2013–2023)

Source: Google Trends.

Far-right activists have used Twitter to diffuse the 15-minute city backlash. I scraped Twitter posts that included #15MinuteCities, #15MinutePrisons, #ULEZ,[23] and #ULEZExpansion from April 1-10, 2023. During this period, a far-right media outlet in Britain, Wide Awake Media,[24] played a key role in promoting disinformation about 15-minute cities. As a proportion of all tweets, Wide Awake Media was connected to 83.7% of #15MinutePrisons tweets, 53.8% of #ULEZExpansion tweets, 37.6% of #ULEZ tweets, and 9% of #15MinuteCities tweets. Figure 2 visualizes the centrality of Wide Awake Media for each of these hashtags. It illustrates the accounts that retweeted or mentioned Wide Awake Media posts related to these topics during the timeframe.
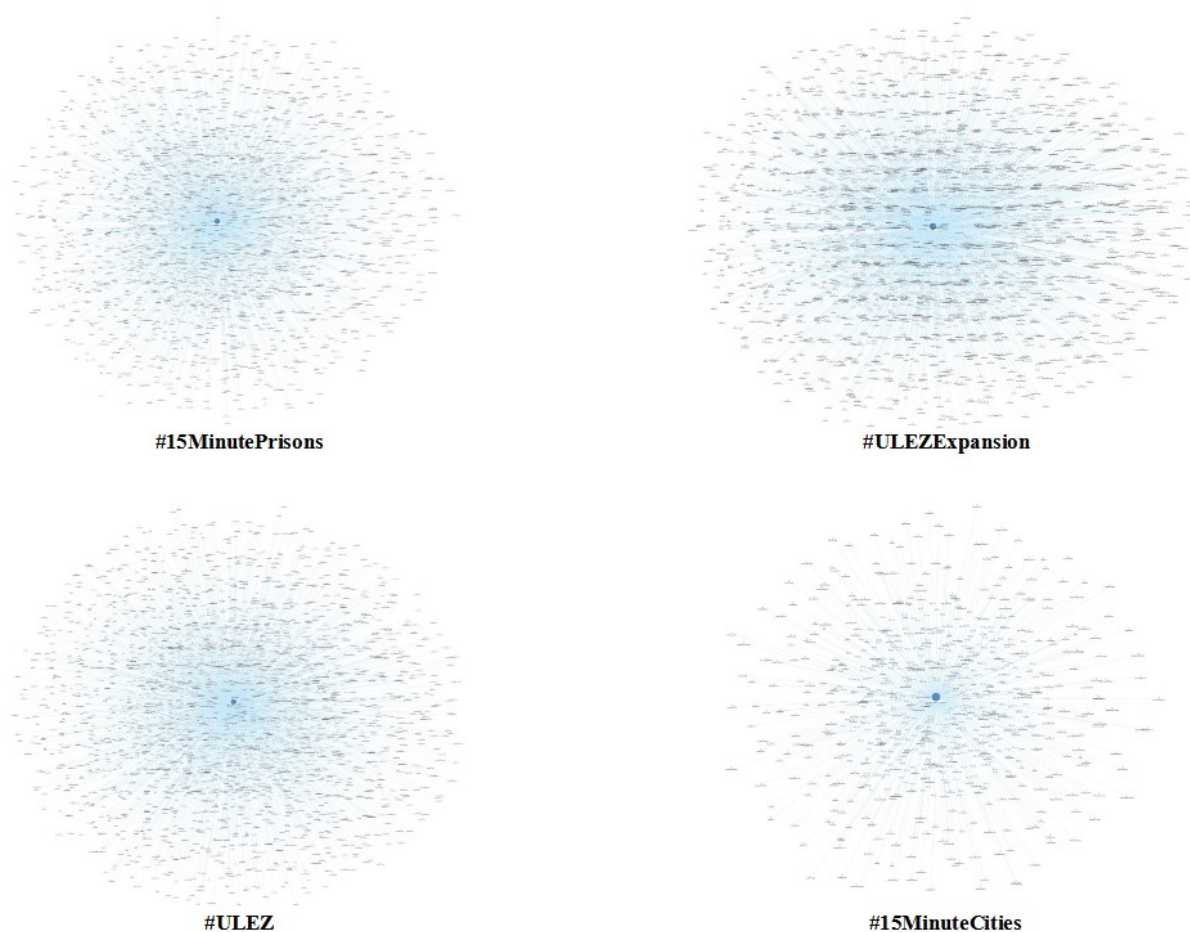
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[21] See, for example: www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/23329831.patriotic-alternative-supporters-urged-attend-oxford-ltn-protest.

[22] See: www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-03-02/how-did-the-15-minute-city-get-tangled-up-in-a-far-right-conspiracy.

[23] In London, the ultra-low emissions zone (ULEZ) is a designated area in which vehicles that violate emissions standards set by the local government are subject to a daily charge. The ULEZ was extended on August 29, 2023, to cover the entire Greater London area. Some other British cities have similar zones, typically known as "clean air zones" (CAZs).

[24] X/Twitter account: https://twitter.com/wideawake_media.

Figure 2. Wide Awake Media was a central node in the diffusion of misinformation about 15-minute neighborhoods during the study period

#15MinutePrisons

#ULEZExpansion

#ULEZ

#15MinuteCities

The spread of this backlash on social media also spanned geographic space. Figure 3 shows #15MinuteCities, #15MinutePrisons, #ULEZ, and #ULEZExpansion were tweeted by users around the world. British news outlets have reported backlashes in the southwest,[25] eastern,[26] northwest,[27] and Yorkshire (north-central)[28] regions of England. Reporters have noted the importation of Britain's far-right frame to Ireland,[29] Canada,[30] and Australia.[31] The backlash against 15-minute cities in Britain has thus impacted planning systems around the world and could affect more in the future. This archival data highlights the interdependency of local backlashes against 15-minute cities. Social media platforms connect these cases by giving far-right activists a pipeline to diffuse populist frames about and strategies to resist sustainable development initiatives by local governments.

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25   See: www.devonlive.com/news/devon-news/torquay-15-minute-cities-protesters-8093963.

26   See: www.gazette-news.co.uk/news/23291124.colchester-council-meeting-interrupted-climate-change-protestors.

27   See: www.northwichguardian.co.uk/news/23345338.controversial-15-miniute-city-cards-cheshire-west.
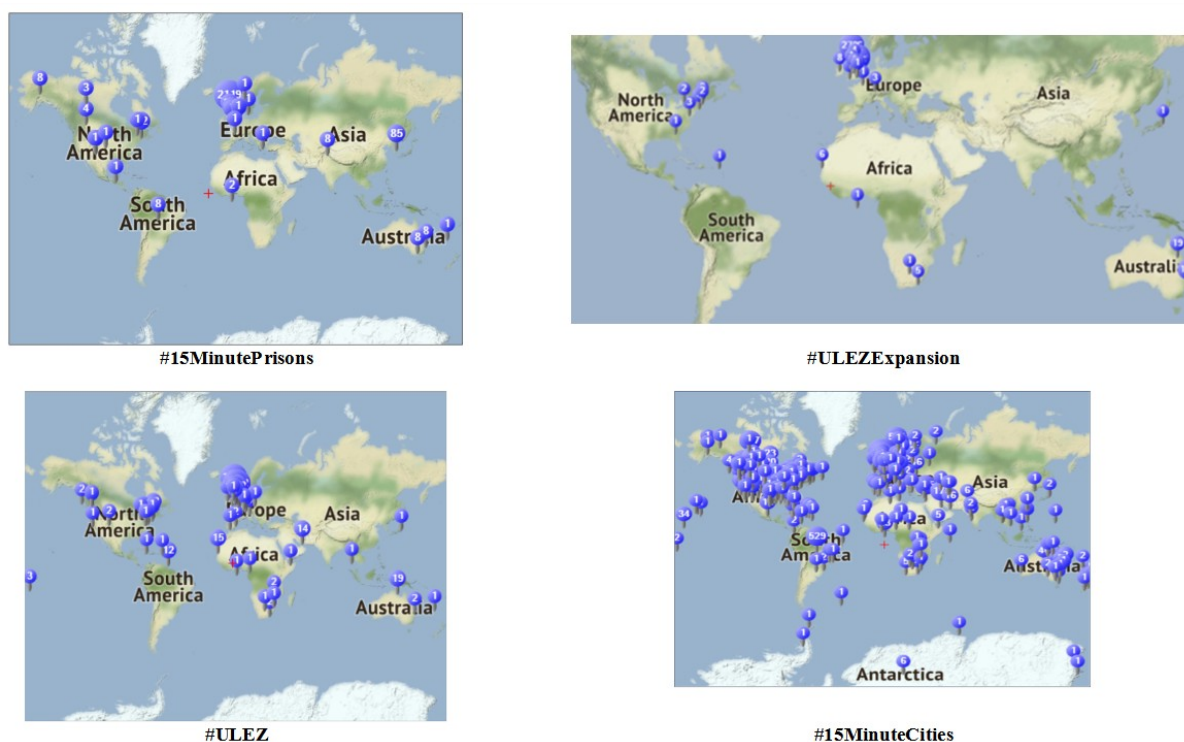
28   See: www.thetelegraphandargus.co.uk/news/23337620.caz-protest-held-bradford-city-centre-march.

29   See: www.thejournal.ie/15-minute-city-conspiracy-theory-ireland-6000851-Feb2023.

30   See: www.theepochtimes.com/backlash-grows-against-15-minute-cities-amid-fears-of-curtailed-movement-future-dystopia_5051801.html.

31   See: https://ferntreegully.mailcommunity.com.au/news/2023-02-06/yarra-ranges-council-meeting-adjourned-after-disruptions.

Figure 3. Several hashtags related to 15-minute neighborhoods were posted by Twitter users around the world at the time of this study

#15MinutePrisons

#ULEZExpansion

#ULEZ

#15MinuteCities

How has the backlash against 15-minute cities affected local planning systems?

Activists create frames to achieve goals through collective action (Benford and Snow 2000). The far right's 15-minute-city frame is motivating conventional democratic responses such as protests,[32] petitions,[33] and electoral campaigns. Far-right activists in Thetford, Norfolk (eastern England),[34] replaced a sustainable-development proponent with one of their members. The councillor-elect has promised to share information with far-right activists about the council's sustainable initiatives so they can pre-emptively mobilize resistance. Far-right activists in other councils have already contacted this man to learn from his success.

Activists are also using unconventional methods to stop 15-minute cities. NOF uses misinformation[35] to delegitimize local officials. Rhetoric like this has fueled hysteria, so much so that Oxfordshire County Council had to address it in December 2022[36] with a 1,603-word public statement. Misinformation is problematic for a couple of reasons. It paralyzes planning decisions by overwhelming the public with information and redirecting debate from substantive topics (Gibson 2018). This delays climate action at a critical moment. Furthermore, misinformation undermines confidence in liberal democracy (i.e. minority rights, rule of law, and separation of power). Promoting misinformation can thus turn residents against sustainable development and reverse democratic gains made during the 20th century.

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[32] See, for example: www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-03-02/how-did-the-15-minute-city-get-tangled-up-in-a-far-right-conspiracy.

[33] For example: https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/633819.

[34] See: www.youtube.com/watch?v=w5Io4J9alOM&t=1764s&ab_channel=RichardVobes.

[35] See, for example: www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-oxfordshire-64223058.

[36] See: https://news.oxfordshire.gov.uk/joint-statement-from-oxfordshire-county-council-and-oxford-city-council-on-oxfords-traffic-filters.

The far right is also using personal threats to intimidate local officials. The councillors in Oxfordshire contacted the police[37] about abuse they had received while local officials from a Canadian county[38] reported similar threats from far-right groups. Threats undermine liberal democracy and sustainable development. Far-right activists can stalk, harass, and/or physically harm local officials who promote 15-minute cities. Because far-right groups recruit military personnel and law enforcement officers,[39] intimidation campaigns like this might include people who can violently attack proponents of sustainable development. This may discourage some officials, elected and unelected, from pursuing sustainable development both within and beyond a local authority as media reports circulate fast online.

Lastly, the far-right press is encouraging property violence to resist 15-minute cities. Wide Awake Media posted a tweet[40] on March 10, 2023, that asked, "Is this what will end up happening to the cameras that make '15-minute cities' possible?" above a video depicting a masked vandal removing a camera. This can be interpreted as a veiled suggestion that viewers should destroy cameras that record license plates to enforce motorist restrictions. Local authorities have also installed traffic bollards to limit motorists on certain streets. The *Daily Mail* published an article[41] on March 28, 2023 about traffic bollards in Manchester with the headline: "Britain's backlash against LTNs:[42] fed-up residents TORCH road-block planters just hours after they were installed as driver clashes with eco-zealots policing another hated blockade–in furious fight back against '15-minute cities." The author justified property violence by calling vandals a "freedom fighter gang" and 15-minute city proponents as oppressive "eco-zealots" who want to "police" residents.

Property violence is problematic for several reasons. It wastes public expenditures at a time when local authorities are financially strapped. Demand for public services will grow as households experience more financial hardship during the current economic slump. This could delegitimize spending on sustainable development. It also says far-right groups will use violence to accomplish goals and may discourage local officials from pursuing sustainable development initiatives. Lastly, the right-wing press spreads articles about property violence on social media that shape public opinion and motivate copycats around the world. This can undermine sustainable development in communities beyond the ones that were vandalized.

"Think globally, act locally" in the age of far-right populism

Readers have probably heard the slogan "think globally, act locally."[43] While this principle originally implored us to shrink our carbon footprint, the far right is inverting it through local campaigns that demand unsustainability. Activists are encouraging residents to fight "globalists" with wasteful lifestyles and promote resistance against sustainable development initiatives. Social media platforms are enabling far-right activists in Britain to spread resistance against liberal democracy and sustainable development around the world.

At a time when Earth is experiencing record-breaking temperatures and ecosystems are collapsing (Raworth 2017), the far right's campaign could accelerate climate change while recruiting new members into its movement. To both stop climate change and the expansion of far-right influence, urban planners must integrate counter-radicalization methods into their public

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[37] See: www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/23177152.oxfordshire-oxford-council-abused-traffic-filters.

[38] See: https://windsorstar.com/news/local-news/essex-county-meeting-cancelled-after-unruly-protest.

[39] See, for example: www.icct.nl/sites/default/files/2022-12/Right-wing-extremism-in-the-military-1.pdf.

[40] See: https://twitter.com/wideawake_media/status/1634190260748812294.

[41] See: www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-11910455/Freedom-fighter-gang-torch-road-block-planters-just-hours-installed.html.

[42] LTN is the abbreviation for "low-traffic neighborhoods," whereby plans are implemented at neighborhood level to reduce motorized traffic passing through residential areas, using filtered permeability and traffic-calming measures.

[43] See: www.undp.org/blog/think-globally-act-locally.

engagement strategy. This will ensure climate action fortifies rather than undermines liberal democracy.

That said, readers should not interpret my analysis as an uncritical defense of 15-minute cities. There are legitimate concerns about the impact of 15-minute cities on vulnerable groups,[44] [rural communities,[45] and tradespersons.[46] British residents have voiced these concerns without the far right's populist frames and local governments have responded to them with policy changes. Progressive activists can thus resist the far right by not labeling all 15-minute city opponents as far-right nutjobs, building relationships with residents to identify negative impacts of 15-minute cities on various subpopulations, and helping local governments solve problems that emerge while implementing 15-minute cities.

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Garrett L. Grainger, PhD, is a research associate at Manchester Metropolitan University. Dr. Grainger's research broadly analyzes barriers and enablers of sustainable development. He has published several articles about contemporary homeless governance in *Housing Studies*; *Housing, Theory and Society*; *Urban Geography*; and *Sociology Compass*. His current research examines the far-right mobilization against British planning systems and effective strategies that local officials can use to challenge these efforts.

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[44] See, for example: https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/covid19/2021/05/28/the-15-minute-city-is-a-dead-end-cities-must-be-places-of-opportunity-for-everyone.

[45] See, for example: www.thetelegraphandargus.co.uk/news/19858479.20-minute-neighbourhoods-impossible-rural-areas-yorkshire---councillor-claims.

[46] See, for example: www.spiked-online.com/2023/02/23/its-true-the-climate-fanatics-are-coming-for-your-car.