

Tackling the cumber

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The [Guardian reports this morning](#) that:

Spending extra cash on mental health services would boost economic growth and improve the nation's well-being more than building new roads, according to an academic analysis.

They added:

The report from the London School of Economics (LSE) argues that a rethink is needed inside Whitehall about how to approach spending decisions, with more focus on how the money actually improves people's lives, particularly in terms of wellbeing.

Researchers assessed the cost-benefit ratio of policies across a range of departments in a drive to convince Rachel Reeves she should downgrade costly road projects such as the Lower Thames Crossing in favour of putting more cash into health, education and skills to boost to the economy.

I warmly welcome this finding. I welcome even more the fact that the question was asked.

I am increasingly convinced that beyond a certain point - which is not by any means reached by everyone in the UK at present, motivating my concerns about poverty - well-being is not necessarily improved by increased material consumption. It may even be harmed by it. And when it is well known that things like increased road building solve no known transport problem now but do instead simply encourage more carbon and other waste production, this conclusion can easily be extended to a macro level, as this study has done.

Again, noting the point on poverty, the focus on excess consumption, which drives so much of supposed 'growth' in our economy, is often going to be destructive of well-being in that case.

I like to use the word 'cumber' to describe what excessive consumption produces. The

word can be found embedded in others like 'encumber' or 'cumbersome' but is now rarely used in itself. That is a shame because it means a hindrance, obstruction, or burden.

When walking by the river, noting those going by in their expensive boats, I often think of those craft as cumber. I cannot imagine how they can, with all the hassle they create for the owners and the noise they surround their occupants with when moving, deliver greater well-being for those on board than I can enjoy walking on the riverbank, almost costlessly and so quietly I can actually hear the birds singing and smell the countryside, rather than engine fumes.

The obsession with cars as status symbols within our society is much the same: most of that is driven by the desire for cumber that impedes well-being.

There are many other examples, of course.

And I am sure LSE is right: if we focussed on well-being and not necessarily on vanity projects for politicians that create cumber for our society we might well be better off now.