

Greater Manchester Scraps Clean Air Zone Scheme

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The ill-fated Clean Air Zone (CAZ) in Greater Manchester, a policy that sparked fierce opposition, has been officially abandoned. The costly initiative, which saw signs erected at £1,000 apiece, is now being dismantled as the region turns away from charging motorists up to £60 daily. The scheme, which has cost taxpayers around £100 million since its approval in 2017, faced a public outcry in early 2022 that led to its suspension. Now, the

region's leaders are redirecting resources, with proposals to repurpose the scheme's cameras for crime-fighting efforts under Greater Manchester Police.

The backlash against the CAZ was immediate and intense. Businesses and residents recoiled at the financial burden, prompting local authorities to slap "under review" stickers on signs across Bolton (£11,500), Bury (£6,900), Salford (£14,200), Stockport (£17,000), Tameside (£3,500), Trafford (£9,300), and Wigan (£6,900), at a combined cost of £69,300. The number of signs was substantial: Bolton had 92, Bury 144, Oldham 153, and Stockport 233. The first Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) camera, installed on Vernon Street near Bolton town centre, was intended to enforce CAZ penalties but will now be repurposed.

Robert Downes, Development Manager for the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) in Greater Manchester, hailed the decision as a triumph of pragmatism. In a recent interview, he stated, "Today's announcement marks the end of a protracted lobbying campaign in which FSB fought tooth and nail against a very harmful retrospective policy change. The signs going up triggered a massive reaction from businesses and the public when they realised the huge financial implications." He pointed to other cities where similar schemes have crippled businesses, forcing closures due to unavoidable costs. "There was no need for a CAZ in the 2020s with vehicle technology advancing as it is." "This is a victory for common sense and sustained lobbying," Downes added.

The cameras, initially intended to monitor CAZ compliance, are already being used to support crime prevention efforts. A public consultation in September 2025 will seek residents' views on transferring camera ownership to Greater Manchester Police, enabling their use in addressing serious and violent offences.

Cllr Eamonn O'Brien, Leader of Bury Council and Clean Air lead for Greater Manchester, defended the region's pivot away from the CAZ. "We've always been focused on doing what's right for Greater Manchester," he said in a recent statement. "By accelerating investment in our public transport network, we're showing it's possible to improve air quality faster than a charging Clean Air Zone could have." O'Brien highlighted the Bee Network, which aims to deliver the UK's first fully integrated, zero-emission public transport system by decade's end. The initiative promotes cleaner travel options like buses, walking, and cycling, sidestepping the punitive costs of the CAZ.

The Greater Manchester Air Quality Administration Committee will meet on 31 July to discuss further steps, including the deployment of 38 additional electric buses from Bolton's depot. While the current Labour government has backed some of these green initiatives, critics argue that the focus on costly public transport schemes ignores the immediate economic pressures facing businesses and residents. The scrapping of the CAZ, however, signals a rare win for those who prioritised practicality over ideology in the region's environmental strategy.