

E-scooters

Question for Short Debate

16:04:00

Asked by

Baroness Neville-Rolfe

To ask Her Majesty’s Government what plans they have for further regulating the use of e-scooters given the safety concerns about their use.

The Deputy Chairman of Committees (Baroness Henig) (Lab)

The time limit is one hour.

Baroness Neville-Rolfe (Con)

My Lords, it is a particular pleasure to follow my noble friend Lord Offord of Garvel and to be able to complement him on a powerful and stimulating maiden speech. However, we are here now to ask the Government what plans they have for further regulating the use of e-scooters, given the safety concerns about their use. I feel I have won the jackpot, as this is my first QSD from the Back Benches since 2013.

E-scooters are a recent invention. Like most inventions, they potentially offer some people real advantages. Also like most inventions, they have downsides. The trick, if possible, is to maximise the advantages and minimise the disadvantages.

Unfortunately, developments so far have not been encouraging. There can be no dispute that the law is being widely flouted—never a good place to start. I believe, and the Commons Library note confirms this, that riding e-scooters on public roads is illegal, unless authorised as part of an official experiment. Let us call them Boris scooters so that people listening to the debate can understand that arrangement. I believe that many of the e-scooters that I see on roads are not part of any such experiment. Moreover, unfortunately, it is difficult for the public to identify vehicles that do not qualify—especially on a dark night. In any event, we all know from personal experience that e-scooters are often ridden on pavements, which is illegal in any circumstances. Yet there seem to be limited attempts to enforce the law.

The point, of course, is that heavy objects moving at the equivalent of a fast running speed are potentially dangerous to the public, especially to pedestrians. It is a pity that these problems have been allowed to develop without any attempt by the Government to set appropriate limits and boundaries. Speaking more personally, I live in fear of my life from e-scooters as I walk home from here. If I were disabled, I would be much more worried. The pavements have become a jungle. This has become an urgent matter; something must be done, and done quickly.

I have two possible approaches which I should like us to debate. The first would be radical: namely, to learn from the experience of motorbikes and prohibit the sale of e-scooters in the UK. Arguably, we should have banned motorbikes long ago. They give much pleasure to a small group of people, and my uncle rode one into his 80s. However, they are very dangerous and have been instrumental in the deaths of thousands of young people in the UK. What a waste! If they were invented today, I do not believe we would allow motorbikes to be used on public roads.

For the same reason, although they do not go quite as fast, there is a case for stopping the use of e-scooters on public roads—and doing so now, before more damage is done and more lives lost. There have been 258 collisions in London alone during the first six months of 2021, according to the police, and I am sure this is an underestimate, as many collisions go unreported.

As I said, the risk to the disabled is especially worrying, and I note that organisations representing them, especially the blind, very much agree. I will be particularly interested to see what my noble friends Lord Holmes and Lord Shinkwin have to say on the matter: it is great to see them here today. I add that e-scooters also generate fear for the citizen, both about being injured and being the subject of e-scooter-based mugging.

These are serious disadvantages to e-scooters, and we will hear of others, but we need also to consider the benefits, which might be economic, environmental, or from increased convenience. Taking the economic aspect first, I recognise that new consumer goods can usher in economic growth—think fridges and hoovers in the 1930s, and washing machines and dishwashers in later waves. Bicycles were actually a very early example. So far, the production of e-scooters appears to generate no economic benefit for the UK—they are predominantly manufactured overseas—so benefit must be found, if at all, elsewhere in the economic cycle, and it is difficult to see where it might lie.

We also need to understand what they will replace. There seems very little evidence that they will replace cars. The main users are young people, and they will be substituting for bicycles, including electric bikes, non-electric scooters and public transport. All of these are less dangerous, and cycling is better for your health.

Some have argued that there are environmental advantages. Interestingly, the House of Commons report suggests this may not be the case, at least at present, essentially because there is a high carbon cost in manufacturing, as well as in obtaining the rare minerals increasingly needed in large quantities for batteries. Nor can I see that, overall, there is a net benefit in convenience for society as a whole. Although I am normally free market in my approach, as colleagues will know, I think a ban would be worth considering.

However, there is a second approach, which is to regulate, provide appropriate powers and penalties, and give the police or local and transport authorities the resources needed to enforce the law. The regulations would need to cover the safety and design of the scooters so that they are less dangerous and, in particular, do not catch fire, which has been an issue mentioned in a number of recent media reports. The design might include lights and sounds. The regulations would also need to cover speed limits, mandatory helmet wearing—given their speed—perhaps a simple driving test, and compulsory insurance. We would also need existing laws to be properly enforced. If this approach were chosen, a proper costed impact assessment would be illuminating.

Perhaps my noble friend could advise on what basis current e-scooter provision has been permitted under law and whether we presently have the subordinate powers to make legislation of the sort I have outlined—or something like it—or whether a new Bill would be needed for that purpose.

I have called this debate today because I am very worried by the present situation. We are drifting into a bad place and failing to act as scooter numbers mushroom, making action needed to control them much more difficult. There are various trials going on, of course, and I look forward to an update on the results.

I am grateful to so many fellow Peers for speaking today in last business. It is because we are all looking to the Government for a response and for action on this matter. I very much look forward to the reply from my noble friend, and I hope she will surprise me.

16:11:00

Lord Holmes of Richmond (Con)

My Lords, it is a pleasure to follow my noble friend Lady Neville-Rolfe, and I congratulate her on securing this timely and incredibly important debate. I echo her congratulations to our noble friend Lord Offord on his excellent maiden speech as well.

How can e-scooters be part of a public realm of transport which is inclusive by design? How can they fit within anything which could be seen as safe? Just today, a report mentioned the fire risks and trip hazards when they are abandoned on pavements. The riders themselves, often young men or boys from lower socioeconomic groups, can be injured and sometimes tragically killed. How is this something that any Government would seek to support in any of our key policy areas?

We are told that e-scooters are part of micro-mobility, and I can see some potential use cases there. But I ask my noble friend how e-scooters can help with people’s health? How can they help other pedestrians, who—as is suggested by the word “pedestrian”—are trying to walk on the pavement? For me, that is an impossibility and a clear and present danger, but they would be a trip hazard for anybody. The bays, often sited on pavements, take up crucial pedestrian space as well.