

UK green light boosts low carbon cars

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The UK electric vehicle market is experiencing a gear change.

Recent boosts range from the pre-Budget report's announcement last week of tax breaks for electric company cars and vans, to news that electric vehicle charging points will be installed in car parks beside Hadrian's Wall.

Grey charging posts, topped with a blue light, are beginning to appear beside roads and parking bays in north-east England. They may not look like the advance guard of a revolution but their installation proves to sceptical consumers that a charging network is being created for the electric cars that will become more widely available over the next two years.

Regional development agency One NorthEast will this Friday announce incentives for drivers using the region's charging points. Installation of hundreds of these is beginning in the region, in partnership with Tesco, British Gas, CE Electric UK, the AA and Capital Shopping Centres. The north-east is also at the forefront of programmes to let the general public trial electric vehicles on the roads. Such schemes provide valuable data and promote the low carbon motoring concept.

Determined to develop new economic strengths in its region, ONE has identified low carbon vehicles as a sector where there is critical mass on which to build. This includes expertise in biofuels, hydrogen and transportation, as well as automotive engineering.

The government this summer declared the Sunderland area the UK's first Low Carbon Economic Area focused on ultra-low carbon vehicles, giving the green light to a training centre, test track and technology park. The location is significant because Nissan's Sunderland car plant is striving to be chosen as the European production centre for Nissan's new electric car, the Leaf, now starting trial production in Japan. An announcement on European manufacturing is awaited.

Earlier this year Nissan at Sunderland joined the RDA in signing a memorandum of understanding to spearhead the UK's drive towards zero emission mobility. This summer, with Gordon Brown, the prime minister, and Peter Mandelson, business secretary, in attendance, Nissan announced a €200m (£180m), 350 job, investment at Sunderland in a new plant making batteries for electric vehicles.

"The north-east is ahead of the game; it's a shining example of what we want regions to do," says the Department for Transport. The DfT has already committed £400m (\$650m) of support nationally to encourage development and uptake of ultra-low emission vehicles. The UK, it says, can be a world leader.

As electric vehicles bury their milk float connotations, some companies are working to make them much more exciting. Yorkshire entrepreneur Lawrence Tomlinson, a race driver who bought racing car maker Ginetta in 2005, has just unveiled its first prototype electric car, characterised by its streamlined shape and sharp handling.

"There's no need for electric cars to look like boxes," he says. "It's because manufacturers take an existing model and try to adapt it. This is fun to drive."

The electric Ginetta has a 200-mile range and can reach 110 mph. Mr Tomlinson charges it with his home wind turbine. ZyteK Engineering, based in Derbyshire, in which he has a 40 per cent stake, made its engine. It already supplies electric engines to other manufacturers.

However, to Mr Tomlinson's disappointment, the government's technology strategy board turned down Ginetta's request for £1.7m to move from prototype to commercial production. "The electric car being produced in Britain won't happen because we do not get it," he says. However, Tim Scott, another racing car specialist – the man whose company engineered the Formula Three "Flying Carrot" racing car, powered with biodiesel from waste chocolate, – says it is important at this stage to keep an open mind on all potential low-carbon fuels.

Mr Scott, managing director of Durham-based Scott Racing, is delighted at north-east England's head-start in electric vehicles but thinks that focusing on electricity as a power source may be "taking the easy route".

Hybrids may ultimately offer cleaner energy options as well as greater range and flexibility, he believes, but they present much more complex engineering problems. Mr Scott, an electronics and control system engineer, believes hybrid combinations such as petrol/electric and hydrogen/electric may be well worth exploring.

Ineos Bio in Teesside is even studying whether household and commercial waste could be converted into carbon neutral transport fuel.

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