

Self-driving cars could be on UK roads by 2026, says transport secretary

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Autonomous vehicles could be on UK roads as soon as 2026, the transport secretary has said, as ministers seek to capture as much as £42bn of the international self-driving market within the coming decade. "This technology exists, it works, and what we're doing is putting in place the proper legislation so that people can have full confidence in the safety of this technology," Mark Harper told BBC Radio 4's Today programme on Wednesday. Asked if people would be able to travel in self-driving vehicles "with your hands off the wheel, doing your emails" in 2026, Harper replied: "Yes, and I think that's when companies are expecting – in 2026, during that year – that we'll start seeing this technology rolled out." Responding to a question by the former Top Gear presenter James May – who was Today's guest editor – about why the government was supporting the development of autonomous driving, Harper claimed there were "a few" reasons. He said: "I think it will actually improve road safety. We already have a very good road safety record in Britain but there are still several thousand people a year killed on our roads. That could be improved. "It's a big economic opportunity for Britain to get what will be a big global share of market. The final thing is, there are a lot of people who currently don't have the opportunity to get the freedom that many of us drivers take for granted. "For example, there are people who have disabilities, people with learning disabilities, who don't have the same freedom that driving brings the rest of us. This potentially opens up a whole new world for personal freedom, getting to work, having the ability to not have to rely on other people." The remarks came as a bill to regulate the use of automated vehicles moves through the House of Lords and as Britain vies to lead the field in autonomous driving. As critics have cited safety concerns and argued the proposed legislation is not ready for a transition period of autonomous and standard vehicles – industry players, however, have said the bill provides a growth opportunity for the domestic industry. The transport secretary said companies were expecting to introduce the technology gradually in 2026 and with it the ability to improve road safety, provide an economic opportunity for Britain and grant personal freedom to those unable to drive. Last year, the government pledged to allow the first self-driving cars on British roads by 2025. In April, the government approved another step on the path to self-driving cars as the first hands-free self-driving system was approved for British motorways. By 2035, the UK could capture as much as £42bn of the international self-driving market, according to Lord Davies of Gower. "We already know the technology works," Harper told the BBC, adding that he had seen it used in California, where the automated technology has been approved for use on public roads. As the government seeks to compete with Silicon Valley's promise to revolutionise the way we drive, autonomous vehicles have faced increased scrutiny in recent months. The founder of Cruise, owned by General Motors, resigned in November after the driverless

car company lost permission to operate following safety incidents. Last month, a judge found “reasonable evidence” that Elon Musk and other executives at Tesla knew that the company’s self-driving technology was defective but allowed the cars to be driven anyway. When debating the bill in November, Lord Naseby said that as of 10 November, the California Department of Motor Vehicles had received 673 autonomous vehicle collision reports. “Well, if safety is primary to this legislation, that is not a very good start, is it?” he said.