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Travel planners should focus on the journey to work trip

Tim Pharoah correctly points out that the effect of personalised travel plans needs to be assessed at the household level (Letters LTT 29 Nov). However, I think he gives a misleading impression by only highlighting the negative consequences where reductions in car commuting may be countered by additional car use amongst other household members. This is only a small part of the story. According to the National Travel Survey there are five times as many 'main drivers' in car owning households as there are 'other drivers'. Hence, assuming that most of the people who commute by car are main drivers (including all members of single adult households, by definition), it follows that the majority of other adults in the same household are likely themselves to be main drivers or else non-drivers. In all these cases the fact that one person ceases to drive to work will not add to the driving propensity of others. In other words the potentially negative consequences do not come into play.

By contrast on the plus side, and of far greater importance, is the potential impact on car ownership within the household. If someone ceases to need a car every day in order to travel to work (and has no other daily commitment) then this alters the economics of car ownership dramatically. In cities, a single person may well decide to forgo a car of their own and utilise a car club or car hire instead when they need one. In suburban situations a couple may find that they can live with one car rather than two, particularly if all household members are prepared to make the occasional journey by other means.

It is the transformative situation that arises from changes in car ownership that travel planners should be focusing on because this reduces individuals' propensity to drive for all trip purposes. However, it makes sense to approach this via the commuting journey and especially via workplace travel plans because these can bring to bear a much more powerful set of sticks and carrots than exist in the typical residential situation.

But the 'follow-through' to the home end and counselling on the potential for changes in car ownership and household travel patterns is critical. Such a strategy offers a serious financial incentive to the individual and long-lasting benefits to the community against which the meagre gains from 'freebie' offers temporarily to change habits (whilst car ownership remains unaltered) pale into insignificance.

Peter Headicar
Oxford OX1