

LTT CONFERENCE 26TH OCTOBER 1999

“Monitoring Local Transport Plans”

Traffic Reduction Act – monitoring implications for local authorities

Tim Pharoah

1. The obligation – what it is and what it is not – *reductio ad absurdum*?

The Traffic Reduction Act 1997 does place on local authorities an obligation to

- Review existing and forecast traffic levels and to produce targets for reducing
- Traffic levels on local roads, or
- Rates of growth of those levels

Alternatively, local authorities can explain why such reduction is not appropriate in their areas.

The Act therefore does **not** place any obligation on local authorities to reduce traffic in their areas. I am using the word reduce in the normal sense, i.e. something that is reduced is smaller afterwards than before.

Question: will traffic in the year 2005, or 2010, be less than it is today?

Answer: No

Currently there is no policy to reduce traffic in absolute terms, though there has been a good deal of confusion about this. The Government is due to produce a report on national traffic reduction targets by the end of the year. But my guess is that it will not include a national target for absolute traffic reduction.

Question: is traffic reduction possible?

Answer: of course, but it's not easy.

To date there are very few examples of areas where general traffic reductions have been achieved. Even cities with major long term policies and investment, like Zürich and Amsterdam, have only managed to stabilise traffic in the core city areas; traffic growth continues in the suburban areas and beyond.

Most local authorities will be seeking to avoid making promises they cannot (or would rather not) keep. Here are some tips:

- Plan for a reduction in growth rates, not an absolute reduction. Failure will be much harder to prove, and success will be easier to claim.
- Ensure that estimates of current traffic levels are at the “high” end of the probability range.

- Use “high” forecasts of future traffic, and find reasons to justify this (e.g. lower than average present car ownership, high local economic growth).
- Use household growth and new development as a justification for no overall reduction in traffic.

Here are some more:

- Target peak hour growth, and forecast on the basis of trends – it is likely that congestion in future will slow the rate of growth in the peak hour.
- Target and monitor traffic on main roads only – growth rates are likely to slow as congestion builds up, and extra traffic seeks rat-run routes.
- Choose before and after survey dates carefully, daily and monthly variations can be used to advantage.

2. The impact of household growth

Some local authorities may choose to justify a policy of no traffic reduction.

This may be favoured in:

- Areas with an intense desire to attract new employment and other development may not want to risk discouraging developers, for example parts of the north of England; and
- Areas subject to in-migration, household growth and economic growth, for example parts of the south of England.

Households are growing faster than population, and they are growing faster in the south than in the north. Where new households are accommodated in new housing areas, this may result in a strong case for allowing traffic growth. Although new housing can be designed for greater transport sustainability (as advocated in PPG3 and PPG13), there is precious little evidence of this to date, especially in new areas.

Questions:

Is it acceptable to have more traffic because there are more (smaller) households? Or should traffic targets be based on car kilometres per capita?

Is it acceptable to have traffic growth in the south, balanced by traffic reduction in the north (because of population drift to the south)?

3. What kind of reduction?

The peak/off-peak distinction has already been mentioned, also the split between main and minor roads. Other aspects may be important. For example for those local authorities with both rural and urban areas, it will be prudent to limit traffic reduction targets to the urban areas, where reduction techniques are more readily available. Use of household trip data rather than traffic volume data will help to play down the impact of high growth in rural areas.

Similarly, if targets and monitoring are confined to trips rather than traffic volume, the impact of ever-increasing trip lengths can be limited.

Journey purpose may also need to be considered, especially since in most local authority areas data is available only for the work trip. The Census will renew this information in 2001, providing a reliable base by the middle of the decade.

4. Consensus for traffic reduction? Is it possible without?

Outside the main cities, a consensus on the need for traffic reduction measures is hard to discern. A recent Government-supported "citizens' jury" exercise in Medway found that people prefer carrots to sticks. I suspect this is something we could all believe!

It may be prudent to get on with the carrots (more buses, reallocating unused carriageway space for better purposes, adding cycle paths etc.) and leave the sticks until a bit later. Local politicians in particular seem to favour this approach, perhaps displaying NIMTOOISM.

Some measures are both carrots and sticks at the same time, and may be useful in getting the general message across. Pedestrianisation schemes have achieved this, for example. Reallocation of roadspace from car to bus or cycle may appear to be both stick and carrot, but unfortunately the people benefiting from the carrots may not be the same people who will benefit from the sticks.

5. Delivering the benefits

Traffic reduction on a specific road or in a specific area has to be sufficient to allow redesign of the road or area to provide benefits to other modes and/or environmental improvements. This could mean that the reduction must be at the times creating the capacity constraint, e.g. the morning and evening peak hours.

This brings its problems in terms of balancing public transport demand, since transferring peak trips to bus may increase bus operation costs. If peak trips on the bus means that a car is available to other household members for off-peak trips, this will erode off-peak bus demand, thus further worsening the viability of the bus operation. There is precious little experience of how these conflicting factors interact.

A pragmatic way forward would be to identify the benefits required, for example through public consultation and consensus building, and then devise traffic reduction measures to enable these to be implemented.

6. Monitoring mechanisms – will these drive the policy?

Traffic reduction measures are expected to be monitored. This will form part of the basis on which bids for government support will be decided. The need

for this could mean that traffic reduction measures are designed to meet data limitations rather than desired objectives. For example, some authorities have adopted traffic reduction targets related to the journey to work primarily because of the availability of data, yet the fastest growing journeys are those for certain other purposes like school and leisure.

7. Conclusion

Local authorities will need to come up with traffic reduction targets and measures to achieve them that will satisfy the Government in terms of a clear commitment to demand management. There are many ways in which the requirement can be interpreted, but a pragmatic approach is essential if the deadline is to be met. It will be important not to lose sight of the locally determined objectives that reduced traffic is intended to achieve.

It will be interesting to see whether the first response to the Traffic Reduction Act will be characterised by good judgement, or by good fudgement!

OHP 1

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1. The obligation
reductio ad absurdam?
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3. What kind of reduction?
4. Consensus for traffic reduction?
5. Delivering the benefits
6. Monitoring mechanisms – will these drive the policy?
8. Conclusion

OHP 2

Traffic reduction – Hot Tips

- Plan for a reduction in growth rates (not absolute reduction)
- Use estimates of current traffic at the “high” end of the scale
- Use “high” forecast of future traffic. Justify this with (e.g.) lower than average present car ownership, high local economic growth
- Use household growth and new development as a justification for no traffic reduction plan

OHP 4

...more tips

- Target peak hour growth, and forecast on the basis of trends – congestion in future will slow the rate of growth in the peak hour
- Target and monitor traffic on main roads only – growth rates are likely to slow as congestion builds up, and extra traffic seeks rat-run routes
- Exclude areas with little hope of traffic reduction (e.g. rural areas)
- Choose before and after survey dates carefully, daily and monthly variations can be used to show reductions