

We need commitment to reversing the rising tide of traffic. Policy has changed, but not practice.

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The amount of road traffic in Britain is excessive and should be reduced. Land use planning has a crucial role to play in this, but is often wrongly dismissed as ineffective except in the long term. Of course the impact of land use change on travel is incremental, but the need to stop developing in ways that increase car dependence and use is immediate.

It is now 10 years since Planning Policy Guidance Note 13 aimed to change the way development took place, and to “reduce reliance on the car”. Since then, some of the worst excesses of out-of-centre car-based development have been halted, especially food superstores. But development practice continues to fall far short of what is required. Meanwhile the trend lines are all heading in the wrong direction. During those last 10 years, car miles driven have increased by 14%, the car driver mode share has increased by 12%, and the length of trips driven by car increased by 13%.

Where is the push for action that would reverse these trends? Let’s take the crucial role of parking. Car trips cannot take place without destination parking. The revised PPG13 in 2000 set out for the first time national maximum standards for parking in new developments. This was a step forward in policy terms, but when a new development is being considered, practitioners appear to turn immediately to the table of maximum standards, and to ignore the advice on negotiating levels of provision below these standards. It is still common for agents, consultants and even some local authorities to speak of a “parking requirement” for a new development, despite PPG13 explicitly stating that there should be no minimum requirement. Parking maximums are often treated as new minimums.

If parking is provided at the PPG13 maximum levels, the car mode share to new developments will be higher than average, and fuel growth in car use. Take a new office building of 5,000 square metres floor area. The building is likely to have 200 - 250 employees working there. The planning authority approves it with the maximum parking level set out in PPG13, allowing 166 parking spaces. This means that between 66% and 83% of employees can drive to work. This compares to a national average figure of 63%. Very often, new office space competes with older stock in town centres with good public transport access and little parking provision. Migration of jobs to business parks on edge of town is thus accompanied by an overall increase in car use for commuting and business trips.

Similar problems arise with other developments. Car driver trips currently account for 36% of leisure trips, yet there are new leisure schemes that are almost totally reliant on the car for access. Again, big new shops or leisure centres replace smaller facilities within communities that people could reach

by bus or on foot. The development of large units is not driven by accessibility or social inclusion, but by economies of scale, catchment profiles and drive times. Large chain retailers somehow have managed to persuade planners that bulky goods stores must have huge floor areas and plenty of parking. But what is wrong with town centre shops with delivery services?

Local authorities themselves are not above promoting car-based development, especially if it secures a return on their own land. King's Hill in Kent is a pure Los Angeles style development, complete with dedicated surface car parking for all users and nowhere to walk. True, it was spawned in the 1980s planning free-for-all, but what about Dunsbury "business park" adjacent to A3(M) in Hampshire? If built it will occupy a 22 hectare greenfield site with very poor inbound accessibility by public transport. It contradicts every aspect of sustainable transport policy. The local plan inquiry Inspector recently recommended that the proposal should be deleted, although accessibility arguments did not appear to feature very strongly in this.

Many other business parks are being developed around the country. Almost all are designed and marketed on the basis of easy access to major roads. For distribution centres with low employee/floorspace ratios this may be excusable, but not when there are large concentrations of employment. Off-centre locations inevitably mean that they cannot be reached by public transport, and the sites themselves are developed in ways that cannot be conveniently served by bus.

On the transport side of the equation things are little better. Initiatives to promote public transport use are rarely conceived as a way of promoting sustainable development. Even when they are, the private deregulated environment means that operator participation cannot be guaranteed. Traffic planners are also at fault in trying to "future proof" development schemes against traffic growth. They still argue for enough off-street parking to ensure that on-street parking will never become a problem. They argue for junction and highway enlargements to cater for additional traffic. They still talk about the need to accommodate "background growth" of traffic in addition to traffic generated by new development. In other words they assume that traffic will not be reduced in future. In doing so they more or less guarantee that the assumption will prove to be correct.

So, let's forget about over-generous maximum parking standards and start negotiating low levels of parking in conjunction with a change of development formats, better alternative transport and more accessible locations. Let's stop the practice of dedicated parking. Communal public provision is operationally much more efficient, and over time will bring more parking under public control, which is essential if demand management policies are ever to bite. I acknowledge that there has never been a Government commitment to reducing road traffic, but such a commitment is long overdue. If clearly associated with better overall accessibility, social inclusion and urban quality it could be at the forefront of land use and transport decisions. Meantime, practitioners should tighten their act in meeting the modest challenges already set.