

## **TRANSPORT STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING CITY CENTRES**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The importance of "the city centre" has changed dramatically. For centuries the centre of the city was, by virtue of its position as the most accessible location for all the citizens, the focus of most commercial and cultural exchange. The market place, the city hall, the main theatres and other places of entertainment, the offices of all sorts of commercial enterprise, and places of higher learning: all were grouped together in the physical and psychological heart of the city.

Today, the role of the city centre is very much smaller relative to the rest of the city. For many people, the city centre is no longer a place of regular business, or delight, or even of regular employment. Why has this change come about? Answer: the car and the lorry. The independent means of personal and goods transport have turned inside out the basic tenets of city life: that activities should be close together and mixed together to provide vitality and variety of human interactions and opportunities.

Most British city centres have survived in a reasonably coherent form, unlike many of their North American counterparts, but their role and vitality are nevertheless under threat and, at least in relative terms, much reduced. Continuing attempts to adapt our lives to the car and the lorry are destroying not only the fabric of city centres, but also sucking the life from them as people spend more and more of their time and money in other places.

The re-vitalisation of town and city centres has recently become a firm objective of Government policy, partly because of the firm personal commitment of the Secretary of State for the Environment, John Gummer. Local authorities throughout the country have also

been keen to stem the decline of their traditional centres.

Transport strategies play a key part, not only because successful town centres require good access, but also because the type of access provided has an enormous impact on the environmental quality of the centre. Generally speaking, the higher the proportion of access by private car, the poorer the quality of the environment. Attempts to restrain car access in town centres, however, must take account of the fact that customers, employers and developers often have a choice to go elsewhere. Transport strategies to help re-assert the role of city centres must therefore be planned within the context of the whole city, and the wider region.

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF CLEAR OBJECTIVES**

A transport and land use strategy should be judged by a clearly defined set of objectives, whose achievement must be measurable. For example, such statements as "to improve the economic vitality of the centre" or "cater for essential traffic movements" are not useful unless supplemented with criteria for measuring economic vitality or for defining essential traffic.

Lack of clarity about objectives leads to difficulties in gaining public acceptance, and confused or contradictory policies. In addition, monitoring systems are often rudimentary.

### **ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIES**

Each city needs to define the role of the centre, and to define a transport strategy which helps to achieve and maintain that role. This is the essence of an integrated land use and transport strategy. Different aspects of the transport system interact, and plans must be devised which cover all modes of travel and other aspects such as access for all and environmental quality. Putting together a package of measures and policies which takes full account of these interrelated factors is the task of strategic transport planning. When presenting alternative strategies it is important to distinguish between alternative objectives, and alternative ways of meeting a given set of objectives.

All of this is about the importance of the planning process. Let us now consider some specific aspects of transport policy.

### **TRAFFIC RESTRAINT**

Some cities have adopted a policy of traffic restraint. Typically this includes the restraint of peak-hour work journeys by car to the city centre. This policy has Government support. It is apparently based on the twin objectives of reducing congestion at peak hours, and releasing city centre parking space for what are seen as more important sets of car users (especially shoppers and business visitors).

Table 1. Parking turnover (6.00am to 7.00pm) and arrival rates, by type of parking space.

On-street parking type	Parking turnover	Arrival rate (Maximum per hour)
Long stay, no charge	2.5	0.4
Meter 150 min max stay	7.1	0.9
Meter 60 min max stay	9.6	1.0
Meter 30 min max stay	11.4	1.2

Source: Lessmann 1978 quoted in Topp, 1991. Note: Similar results have been found in more recent studies in Berlin and Hannover.

This policy will not reduce total traffic volume. If spaces are converted from long- to short-stay, traffic will increase because of the increased turnover of parking spaces (see Table 1). Similarly, introducing charges can increase turnover. Such restraint policies are therefore irrelevant to broader environmental concerns. If the objective is to reduce traffic (and pollution) overall, then the total stock of parking must be reduced. Ther Swiss city of Berne provides an example.

A further problem of reducing car commuting is the secondary effect of making a car available to other household members during the day. Such cars, if used for off-peak shopping and other journeys will further erode the off-peak demand for public transport. Combined with the additional peak hour commuting demand, this will undermine the economic viability of public transport.

#### **CITY CENTRE PARKING HELPS THE ECONOMY?**

Conventional wisdom is that the economic success of a city centre depends upon the provision of adequate parking. A parking "problem" is usually defined as a lack of parking. However, the importance of parking to economic success has never been properly investigated in Britain. German research has found that those cities with high levels of parking have performed less well than those with limited parking. Research in Deventer and Nijmegen in the Netherlands found that for visitors (shoppers) other aspects are far more important than parking, e.g. cleanliness, safety, quality of the shops, range of shops, and the atmosphere of the centre. Parking facilities came sixth on the list.

This aspect of city centre planning must be done in relation to parking policies elsewhere in the city. Much of the reluctance to restrict or charge for parking in city centres arises from the provision of free parking in out-of-centre competitor developments. But this is ultimately a hopeless situation. "Full"

parking demand can never be met in city centres because of high land prices. In any case, the provision of parking makes it more difficult to provide a high quality environment. The only sensible route is for city centres to be planned for access by non-car modes.

The revised PPG6 (due this summer) will apparently argue that more parking should be provided in city centres. Such a policy carries with it the danger of destroying the advantages of density, diversity and architectural quality which are the qualities which persuade people to visit centres rather than out-of-town facilities.

Table 2 Previous mode of travel of Park-and-Ride users in four German cities, 1991.

PREVIOUS METHOD OF TRAVEL	%	TENDENCY TO MORE OR LESS TRAFFIC
Went by bus all the way	24	More
Went by car all the way	31	Less
Didn't go to the centre	4	?
Used another P+R	2	?
Unknown/Unusable	12	?
Drove to UBahn station	9	Less
Went by bus to UBahn station	11	More
Went on foot or cycle to UBahn station	7	More
Total	100	
% P+R USERS DRIVING MORE		42
% P+R USERS DRIVING LESS		40
% CHANGE IN DRIVING NOT KNOWN		18

Source: Survey of 4,000 P+R users in Frankfurt, Hamburg, Cologne and Munich. Asked "How did you travel to the city centre before you used Park-and-Ride?". Deutschen Verkehrsverbund, 1991.

#### **PARK AND RIDE?**

Park and Ride can be used for several different purposes. It can be designed for people working in the city centre, and thus result in the movement of long-stay parking from the centre to the outskirts.

Alternatively Park-and-Ride can be used for shoppers from outside the city: often attractive for market towns whose trade depends on people from surrounding settlements. The Park and Ride could be used to enable reductions in city centre parking (e.g. to bring about environmental improvements) or alternatively as a means of increasing visitors without additional city centre parking provision. For example, the Oxford Park-and-Ride system intercepts 17% of incoming car traffic bound for the city centre (about 11% of all people arriving in the city centre) and has moderated the growth of radial car traffic.

Park and Ride can thus substitute for either long or short stay city centre parking, or some mix of the two.

Park and Ride may easily generate more traffic rather than reduce it (see Table 2 above). Local Authorities have rarely bothered to investigate such impacts, and are mostly content if the service is well used.

### **PUBLIC TRANSPORT AND CYCLING**

There is a clear relationship between the mode of travel to the centre and the size of the city. The larger the city population, the greater is the share of public transport, and the smaller is the share of walking, cycling and car.

Plans often include policies and proposals for improving public transport. This may be laudable in itself, since public transport users will enjoy higher quality levels. However, they may be less inclined to pay higher fares for such improvements. If the purpose of better public transport is to reduce the amount of access by car, then it will be necessary to quantify this in the plans, and to reduce city centre parking by the appropriate amount. Mostly this is not the case. All public transport improvements are simply seen as "a good thing", without questioning whether it simply leads to more travel by existing public transport users, or whether it reduces car travel.

Similarly with the bicycle. Proponents of better cycling facilities tend to ignore the fact that cities with high levels of cycling often have poor public transport ridership, and vice versa. It is necessary to determine the appropriate role for each mode of travel, and then to determine both "stick" and "carrot" policies to achieve the desired mix.

### **RING ROADS**

There is something appealing about a complete ring around a city centre. Nevertheless, the actual value of ring roads has never been thoroughly investigated. A ring road may simply be an expression of a high proportion of access to the centre being made by car, and a desire to keep this traffic away from the core shopping areas. Mostly, however, people do not need to drive

around a centre, they want to get to and from it. The concept of the ring is thus counter-intuitive. In larger cities, the size of the centre may mean that the ring would need to be further away than can easily be walked. The proposed inner London ring was an example.

### **CAR-FREE CITY CENTRES**

Some continental cities now have large areas of the city centre from which motor traffic is banned or drastically reduced for whole or part of the day. Nuremburg has probably the largest area with over 5kms of street given over to pedestrians. The term "car-free", however, is not to be taken too literally, because usually some traffic remains. The concept is relative, as with "alcohol-free" drinks which may contain up to a small percentage of alcohol (Topp and Pharoah, 1994).

There are three basic approaches which are being pursued, either singly or together:

Incrementalism: whereby pedestrians are given priority in areas which are gradually enlarged (e.g. Copenhagen, Nuremburg) or given priority at certain times which are then extended (e.g. Lübeck, York).

Discrimination: whereby traffic is limited by discriminating between different city centre users, e.g. Bologna, Milan. Athens discriminates on the arbitrary basis of registration numbers.

Total ban: areas from which traffic is completely removed (e.g. Covent Garden). Because of the need for servicing, such areas are usually much smaller than the city centre.

### **THE USE OF TARGETS**

Targets are gradually being adopted by local authorities as a way of focusing action, and of explaining the rationale of transport and other policies. The target may be for a percentage reduction of traffic within the city centre (e.g. Bristol and Manchester following completion of the ring road), though this may not involve any reduction of vehicle miles travelled, simply a diversion of traffic. York was one of the first to adopt a mode-split target, though only for the journey to work. No authority has yet adopted a traffic reduction target for wider areas of the city.

### **CONCLUSION**

Transport strategies for city centres need to be improved in terms of the objectives which they are intended to achieve, the relationship between the centre and other areas of the city, and the interaction between different users, and different modes of access. Strategies at present too often contain muddled and even conflicting policies.

The major issue is the role of city centre parking, and to what extent this can help economic viability, or destroy the qualities which city centres can offer.

Finally, local authorities undertake little monitoring other than traffic flow changes, so the success or otherwise of any particular strategy can never be properly judged. Planners need to think less about the problems of infrastructure provision, and more about the future role of the city centre, and the specific contribution which access arrangements can make to achieving it.

#### FURTHER READING & REFERENCES

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