

TRANSPORT AND LAND USE PLANNING IN LONDON

an overview

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Policy Issues

Every year, one in ten Londoners change their home. Many also change the places where they work, shop, recreate etc. So it is possible in ten years to have a completely new pattern of journeys from that existing today. And that could be achieved without any change of land use. We therefore must consider not only the development and changing use of land, but also the context for millions of travel decisions.

These decisions are based on people's perception of door to door journeys. How, where and when to travel depends on the relative attraction of different means of getting there. All journeys represent a cost - in terms of time, effort, money, inconvenience - and people's main aim is to reduce these 'generalised costs'. In going this they pay no heed to administrative boundaries, or to divisions of responsibility for the roads they travel on. Yet these divisions have become fundamentally important in determining the fate of transport.

The main issue is the extent to which, as we progress towards a 'fully motorised' society, people will choose to fulfill their travel needs by car. This broad statement requires some elaboration. London's basic land use and transport structure was established before the car and lorry became widely available, and so is suited to public transport. As the city evolves, however, that structure is being eroded in favour of one that is better suited to the private road vehicle. The further this process goes, the more certain will be the continued decline of public transport.

In central London the general case for car restraint is accepted, though there is bitter disagreement over how much is desirable, and over the methods of achieving it. For the longer, regular journeys to the centre, rail remains dominant. But from the inner suburbs, it is often cheaper and quicker to reach the centre by car, even at peak times.

Inner London, already congested, has enormous potential for traffic growth with high residential densities, increasing car ownership and declining local employment. The mobile middle classes are taking over large areas. Most of the inner London centres have parking restraint, but their environment is often poor and trends are working against their prosperity. For example, Sainsbury's will now not open a new

store in inner London unless it has a minimum of 300 ground level parking spaces. In terms of the future of public transport, inner London could go either way, depending largely on the strength and direction of planning control.

In outer London the majority of journeys are already made by car, except for journeys to work in the central area which are mainly by rail. LT has said that it wants to maintain a 'comprehensive and comprehensible' bus network, but it is not easy to see how this will be achieved. Diffuse land use patterns, relatively uncongested roads and cheap land for parking means that there is no obvious case for traffic restraint, except in the larger suburban centres like Croydon. So the demand for buses will continue to drain away as the number of people without cars diminishes. As services contract, more families will own two or more cars. If this becomes dominant the bus network will be impossible to sustain. The question remains as to whether that scenario is acceptable, and if it is, how the needs of the carless will be met.

How are these issues being tackled?

The GLC is in the driving seat (or if not, who is?), but the vehicle of strategic planning in London is something of an old banger! The GLDP transport strategy has four main elements, none of which is being adequately fulfilled.

PUBLIC TRANSPORT continues to decline in both use and overall quality of service. Indeed the recent Medium Term Plan accepts this in outer London (para 3.15).

ROAD MANAGEMENT AND IMPROVEMENT policies still tend to work against public transport. There has been no progress towards comprehensive protection of buses from congestion. Bus stops are still sited for traffic rather than passenger convenience, a situation which even New Yorkers would not accept. The "Medium Term Plan" also accepts that the M25 will lead to increased car-based employment in outer London and aims to provide for that (3.20). This will weaken the attraction of inner and central London, and so the position of public transport.

TRAFFIC RESTRAINT relies entirely on parking controls, and enforcement of these has virtually broken down. No other methods are contemplated. Parking standards are compromised, are inconsistent (e.g. for new or rehabilitated dwellings), and are unable to increase the attractiveness of public transport (parking provision is higher in areas poorly served by public transport, thus ensuring that they remain poorly served).

INTEGRATION OF LAND USE AND TRANSPORT is unsatisfactory, otherwise this conference would not have been arranged!

What is more, the GLDP does not contain (indeed the DOE says that structure plans should not contain) non land-use policies which vitally affect the success of the transport strategy, notably fares, subsidies and parking charges.

Problems of organisation

Transport is perhaps the only crucial strategic planning issue. Unfortunately, the machinery for transport planning in the capital is chaotic.

The Department of Transport meddles in road planning, for example on the Archway Road; half of the railway system is controlled by the GLC, the other half (BR) by the Government; there is no power, let alone will, to implement traffic restraint measures such as supplementary licensing or control of private car parks; the Government has a tight financial grip on the GLC's finances, coupled with a blatant disinterest in public transport and antagonism towards revenue support.

The latest answer to some of these faults is to give control of LT to a new Transport Authority. If this happens it is doubtful whether the remaining ragbag of powers could justify keeping the GLC. The criticism that the GLC is a strategic head, but not a strategic body, would be difficult to refute.

The GLC and the London Boroughs represent, or should represent, different levels of interest. Of course these interests conflict - if they did not then the need for two-tier local government would largely disappear - and it is not always easy to say where the balance should be struck. Whatever the answers, the questions remain intensely political, and that is how it should be. The issue is whether the GLC and the boroughs properly represent strategic and local interests.

For the GLC the problem (as already outlined) may be described as one of responsibility without adequate powers. The boroughs, in the area of transport and especially public transport, have neither power nor responsibility. Their general lack of interest is therefore understandable. Local plans can do little more than parrot the GLDP on transport issues. Moreover, the plans themselves are often treated with scepticism.

About a third of the boroughs have no borough-wide plan on the horizon, nearly all in outer London. With the GLC apparently content to accept the trends, and the outer boroughs disinterested in transport issues, how can the suburban bus possibly survive?

Even the inner boroughs, where public transport is more crucial to the needs of the electorate, are unlikely to spare much effort on the issue without more tangible responsibility for its outcome.

Possible improvements

There is a lack of expertise in the field of land use and transport planning, particularly at borough level. The GLC's recent suggestion of providing help to the boroughs in preparing local plans may therefore be a step towards better land use/transport policies. The generally poor understanding of transport by planners, however, must in part be due to inadequate coverage of the subject in Town Planning education. This is a subject to be tackled by the RTPI's new Transport Group. There is also a need for highway and traffic engineers to be more aware of the relationships between their work, land use control, and public transport.

The GLC should be more involved in the quality of travel in different parts of the city. Monitoring the performance and trends of services in central, inner and outer London could be related to specific allocations of subsidy. At present, revenue support for LT is paid for the system as a whole. It is LT who talk of maintaining a 'comprehensive and comprehensible' bus network, but this is a strategic (GLC) issue. Maintaining unremunerative bus services in outer London, for example, may be inconsistent with the GLC's directive of maximising passenger miles within the given level of grant.

The London Boroughs need a more powerful incentive to get involved in transport policy. The suggestion that part of LT's budget should be allocated for bus services by the Boroughs could go some way to achieving this.

The GLC is presently contemplating a revision of the GLDP. One may question the wisdom of this when the Council lacks the powers to implement the existing plan. The first priority should surely be a revision of the transport planning machinery in London.

The GLC's strategic powers need strengthening. In particular, the long standing anomaly of DTP Trunk Roads in London should be removed, and the GLC should take responsibility for BR's suburban services. If road planning, traffic management and bus and rail services cannot be planned together with land use, the prospects for real improvement are slim.

All this adds up to greater political accountability at the GLC and Borough levels in the overall provision of transport. This is, of course, opposite to the currently popular suggestions, eg by the House of Commons Select Committee and BR for centralised control of public transport in the South East (through the proposed MTA).

The MTA idea should be firmly opposed. It would remove the opportunity to develop consistent policies for public and private transport and land use. It would divorce public transport issues from local democracy. One probable result of this would be that inner London public transport services would continue to be starved of financial support.

London Transport in particular should encourage more local government involvement in the planning of their services. This will to some extent restrict the freedom of the Executive to decide on particular service levels, but this may be a small price to pay for ensuring the survival of the system as a whole. The only justification for policies to counter the trend towards car use is concern about social needs and strategic planning considerations. Such policies can be adopted by the GLC and the London Boroughs, but not by the Executive or by a remote-control Metropolitan Transport Authority.