Travel patterns in ‘smart’ towns show potential for traffic reduction

Residents in Darlington, Peterborough and Worcester have a realistic alternative for about 40-50% of their local car trips, according to recent research. With DfT funding, these towns are now introducing extensive packages of ‘soft’ measures to encourage people to choose more sustainable travel options. Sally Cairns reports

In April last year Darlington, Peterborough and Worcester were named as winners of the DfT’s ‘sustainable travel towns’ competition. Jointly, they were allocated £10m over five years, to become showcases of what can be achieved by implementing a range of ‘softer’ transport policies. Last month the towns reported on their first year of work at a conference held in Darlington. This marked the beginning of a sequence of annual conferences to report progress.

The sustainable travel towns initiative follows on from recent DfT-commissioned research on ‘Smarter Choices’. This study examined the likely impacts of implementing a range of ‘soft’ measures such as workplace and school travel plans, information and marketing campaigns, and comprehensive travel planning services. The research on ‘Smarter Choices’ followed on from recent DfT-commissioned research on ‘Smarter Choices’. This study examined the likely impacts of implementing a range of ‘soft’ measures such as workplace and school travel plans, information and marketing campaigns, and comprehensive travel planning services. The research on ‘Smarter Choices’ followed on from recent DfT-commissioned research on ‘Smarter Choices’. This study examined the likely impacts of implementing a range of ‘soft’ measures such as workplace and school travel plans, information and marketing campaigns, and comprehensive travel planning services.

Providing the personal travel planning touch

All three sustainable travel towns are planning to undertake extensive personal travel planning. Their initiatives will constitute some of the most extensive work of this kind in the UK. Personalised travel planning (also known, for example, as ‘Individualised Marketing’, ‘TravelSmart’, ‘Travel Blending’ or ‘Living Change’), involves giving people information, advice and other incentives to use more sustainable travel options that are specific to their circumstances. For example, residents might be offered a timetable about buses visiting their nearest bus stop, free ‘taster’ tickets enabling them to try out the services, maps of local walking, cycling or shopping opportunities, individual advice on how they could optimise their travel, etc. Many proponents also argue that a key aspect of successful work is enabling participants to request what they want to receive (rather than distributing materials to all).

Work of this nature has been taking place for a number of years, with high profile success in Australia. In the UK, the charity Sustrans generated interest in the topic by undertaking small-scale projects in Gloucester and Frome in 2001. These led on to Transport for London’s Travel Options work (involving 4,000 households), the Scottish Executive’s Stewchange initiative (involving 4,000 households) and a DfT programme of 14 pilot projects throughout the UK, including larger projects focused on 10,000 residents in Gloucester and 15,000 employees in Oldham). From the five pilot projects that they were involved in, Sustrans has reported consistent reductions in car driver trips of 10-12% and a full evaluation of the programme is expected from the DfT soon. Meanwhile, the sustainable travel towns are planning work on a significantly larger scale. Darlington is preparing to engage all 98,000 of its residents, Peterborough is aiming to target about 70,000 people and Worcester is focusing on higher car ownership areas representing about 60% of the city (56,000 people). In all three areas, contracts are currently being let and work will commence shortly.

Perhaps partly because of this, the survey work also revealed significant differences in the potential for change. In a smaller, in-depth survey, 1,209 respondents were asked why they made specific journeys by car. For each trip, researchers then analysed why realistic alternatives were available (by walking, cycling or public transport), taking account of factors such as acceptable walking distances, comparable bus times and luggage or disability constraints. In Darlington, at least one viable alternative was found for 56% of car trips within the town, compared with 46% in Worcester and 39% in Peterborough.

Taken together, these results imply that there should be substantial potential to achieve behavioural change in all three locations using ‘soft’ measures but the degree of change achieved could be significantly different.

Achieving change will also depend on the strategies that the towns adopt. Already it is clear that their approaches share similarities but, also, important differences. All three now have staff dedicated to introducing workplace and school travel plans. However, in Darlington, these are relatively recent appointees, whilst Worcester has a relatively established travel planning programme, having already worked with about half its schools. All three towns will be undertaking extensive personalised travel planning (see panel left).

All three are also undertaking considerable marketing activity, albeit with differing emphases. Darlington has initially developed some relatively general advertising, as part of trying to generate a ‘mood for change’ (see...
Darlington: a town on the move

Darlington, the town identified in the recent survey work as having the greatest potential for change, began its work by extending half-price fares for under-16s to all bus services across the borough. Positive marketing has also been put in place, including radio adverts featuring music from a local band. “Get ready to change the habits of a lifetime,” proclaims one voice-over, whilst others advise people to try walking, cycling or taking the bus.

Travel plan officers have been appointed to start working with local schools and businesses. A small grants scheme has been established for employers and free cycle training is offered to all schools. The consultancy Steer Davies Gleave has just been contracted to start the first of three phases of personalised travel planning, which will involve all residents. Living Streets (formerly the Pedestrian’s Association) is in the process of completing community street audits in four areas of the town, aimed at producing recommendations about benches, litter bins, lighting, surfacing, crossing points, signing and maps. A series of cycle guides are also being developed. As part of leading by example, the council is proposing to sub-contract its mail delivery system to ‘Green-link’, a cycle courier firm, and, within the region’s car sharing site (www.2plustravel.com), a car-sharing facility specifically for the council’s employees has been set up and promoted. A number of awareness-raising events are planned for the summer, including participation in national campaigns, a two-day ‘Darlington walking festival’ and a series of organised bike rides.

Meanwhile, the sustainable travel town work coincides with a major pedestrianisation scheme being implemented in the town centre, which should provide substantial reinforcement for the softer initiatives taking place. Measures will include the exclusion of traffic from key central streets, major streetscape improvements incorporating public art work, better routes for pedestrians and cyclists, new bus shelters and greater bus priority.

As well as focusing on the experience of Darlington, Peterborough and Worcester, the conference also explored the opportunities for other towns to undertake their own programmes of softer measures. Funding was seen as a critical issue, in particular the need for revenue funding and the problems of obtaining this via the local transport plan process that provides capital funding only.

Lynn Sloman, one of the authors of the ‘Smarter Choices’ report, reported on new analysis, suggesting that an intensive ‘Smarter Choices package’ for a typical town could be expected to cost an average of £5 per resident per year in revenue funding. She argued that the new LTP guidance encourages local authorities to bid for money for ‘smarter choice’ measures, highlighting paragraph 70 in part 4, which states: “The Department would encourage authorities to consider how they might follow the lead of others in exploring how ‘revenue-type’ transport activity, aimed at maximising the benefits of particular infrastructure projects, could be funded from capital allocations”.

Speaking subsequently, Geoff Gardner, travel awareness officer at North Yorkshire County Council, noted that 1% of capital expenditure in its integrated transport programme is already allocated for travel awareness activities, on the basis that awareness-raising is needed to maximise the benefits of capital projects. Don Nutt, consultant Steer Davies Gleave, argued that requesting LTP funding for ‘smarter choice’ measures could be justified as they should make a central contribution to achieving progress on the four shared-priority areas that authorities are directed to put at the heart of their next LTP, namely delivering accessibility, tackling congestion, better air quality and safer roads.

In summary, then, the recent survey work undertaken in Darlington, Peterborough and Worcester suggests that there is considerable potential for towns to achieve travel behavioural change and the initiatives being implemented offer an exciting opportunity to see if this change can be achieved in practice. At the same time, many other towns have the opportunity to emulate the sustainable travel towns, if softer measures are made a higher priority for funding. LTP allocations may be key to this.

Speaking at the conference, Patricia Hayes emphasised the importance of short-distance local journeys, highlighting, for example, that people make as many trips by bike as by train. Yet the recurrent complaint by many local authority officials is that DfT funding is still heavily skewed towards long-distance, heavy infrastructure solutions. If the sustainable travel towns achieve success, this may provide the catalyst for an entirely new focus to transport policy.

‘Introducing an intensive ‘Smarter Choices package’ for a typical town would cost an average of £5 per resident per year in revenue funding’ Lynn Sloman, Transport for Quality of Life