

SMARTER CHOICES – WHY SOFT THE BEST ALTERNATIVE



ON 20 JULY 2004 the Government published a new White Paper on *The Future of Transport*¹ On the same day, three supporting documents were issued. The first was

the road pricing feasibility study.² The second was the review of Crossrail.³ The third, entitled *Smarter Choices – Changing the Way We Travel*,⁴ was about the potential of the so-called 'softer' transport policies. Given the furore generated by the first two reports, the third was somewhat overlooked. And yet, 'soft' transport policies could potentially make an equal, or greater, contribution to changing travel patterns in the future.

As yet, there is no simple definition of these 'soft' policies. Generally, they are about improving the *quality* of alternatives to the car (not simply the quantity of, say, bus provision or cycle routes). They are about influencing people's knowledge and perceptions of these alternatives. And, in some cases, they are about providing entirely new opportunities or alternative ways of doing things. The White Paper places them centrally in the chapter on roads, within a discussion which highlights that it is not possible to build our way out of congestion. The implication is that investing in 'soft' policies and other demand management measures represents a considerably 'smarter choice' than a national strategy which fails to try to curb car use.

Moreover, according to the *Smarter Choices* report, the potential of soft policies is substantial. Specifically, it examines a scenario where implementation of such policies is significantly expanded (albeit to a level which seems feasible given current political and resource constraints), in a context where the benefits are 'locked-in' with complementary measures that discourage induced traffic. In these circumstances, it is estimated that 'soft factor' policies could cut peak-hour urban traffic by 21 per cent, make a smaller but still significant impact in non-urban areas (14 per cent in the peak), and reduce overall national traffic levels by 11 per cent from current levels, within the next ten years.

In cost/benefit terms, 'smarter choice' policies also appear to represent particularly good value for money. For every pound spent, it is estimated that about 70 kilometres of car traffic would be removed from the road. Moreover, using current



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Department for Transport (DFT) evaluation methods, this would represent a saving of £10 in congestion benefits alone (with additional savings from environmental gains, etc.).

However, perhaps the most interesting part of the report is its evaluation of existing experience of implementing these types of policies. As well as drawing on international literature, the report looks in particular detail at 24 UK initiatives, focused around four main types of 'soft factor' or 'smarter choice' policies – site-specific 'travel planning'; marketing and awareness work; schemes to encourage more efficient car use; and initiatives that reduce the need to travel via information and communication technologies (ICT).

The philosophy behind site-specific 'travel planning' is that detail matters. As such, it involves close examination of the specific opportunities and constraints facing users of a particular site, and consulting them about what they think would make a difference to their travel habits.

In the UK, this approach has been most developed for workplaces and schools. Typical travel plan measures include, for example, providing a shuttle bus to connect a local railway station to the office; putting in a safer crossing at a well-known danger spot on the way to school; introducing new cycle parking which protects against both bike thieves and the vagaries of the weather; and allocating prime parking spots to people who share cars, etc. Such measures are usually introduced in parallel with awareness-raising work, whether this means displaying the local bus timetables in the company lift, or classroom work on the health benefits of walking and cycling.

In places such as Birmingham, York, Nottingham, and parts of Cambridgeshire, the local authorities have already persuaded companies representing about 30 per cent of the workforce to get involved in workplace travel planning (specifically representing 136,000, 26,000, 52,000, and 34,000 people, respectively). An earlier study⁵ of 20 good-practice workplace travel plans found

OPTIONS MAY BE



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Left: Walking bus operating in Southwark
Above: Marketing materials produced by Buckinghamshire County Council to promote alternative travel options
Above right: Park 2 park – Nottinghamshire County Council's car park converted for a day as part of its travel plan
Below right: Spaces reserved for car sharers at Boots' headquarters

that, on average, travel plans were reducing the number of cars arriving per 100 staff by 18 per cent. The latest report provides many new examples of companies which have achieved more than this (including, for example, car driver reductions of 27 per cent at Priory Hospital in Birmingham; 43 per cent at Norwich Union in Bristol; 33 per cent at the Government Office for the East of England; and 23 per cent at Cambridge University), indicating that such experience is replicable in many places.

School travel planning is also taking off. Local authorities in York and Buckinghamshire reported that they had already worked with over half of their schools, and were on track to have fully

fledged plans in place at nearly all of them by the end of the decade. Drawing on parallel, forthcoming research on school travel planning⁶ (which has examined experience from 23 English local authorities), analysis suggests that school travel planning can also be very effective at cutting traffic. On average, school travel plans reduce car use by 8-15 per cent, while a significant proportion of schools reduce car use by over 20 per cent, and some schools cut car use by more than half.

Next, the report examined marketing and awareness initiatives – focused on influencing people's knowledge and perceptions of transport alternatives, and, often, producing information in more understandable formats.

At one extreme, such initiatives are about changing outrageous beliefs, like Margaret Thatcher's, that 'any man who rides a bus to work after the age of 26 can count himself a failure in life'. At the other, most simplistic level, they are about producing bus maps that don't look like a tangle of spaghetti, and timetables where the writing is big enough to read.

Three policy variations of marketing and awareness initiatives were examined – personalised travel planning, public transport information and marketing schemes, and travel awareness campaigns.

With personalised travel planning, residents are offered travel information which is very specifically tailored to their individual

circumstances. For example, they might choose to receive a bus timetable for the stop closest to their home, some free tickets enabling them to try the local service, or a neighbourhood map showing local shops and walking routes.

A notable scheme, in Bristol, was targeted at a neighbourhood alongside a newly improved 'showcase' bus corridor. Six months after the scheme, bus use by residents all along the corridor had increased, but the increase was over twice as great in the area which had received personalised travel planning. Moreover, far more of the new bus users from that area were previously driving for their journeys (whereas those from the other areas were more likely to have been travelling as a car passenger or pedestrian).

Another policy variant of marketing and awareness work is where the public transport operator attempts to improve the information and marketing about public transport more generally.

For example, in Nottingham, the bus operator has completely reorganised the network. All routes now start or finish in the city centre, key routes operate on a 10-minute frequency, and the buses have been painted in different colours, depending on the route they serve. Bus stop information has also been simplified and colour coded. These measures have been sufficient to reverse a long-term decline in bus use in the city.

A similar focus on simplicity, information, and marketing has also been part of a long-term strategy in Brighton and Hove, which has resulted in a 5 per cent per annum increase in bus use for the last ten years.

Meanwhile, some places are also undertaking 'travel awareness campaigns'. For example, in York the council has employed dedicated marketing staff to promote the benefits of new walking and cycling infrastructure. Adverts have featured in cinemas, on the backs of buses, and, now, even on beer mats in pubs. In feedback from the first campaign, about a third of motorists reported seeing the adverts, and about 40 per cent of them said that they were using their cars less as a result.

The third type of 'smarter' transport policy is about schemes which encourage more efficient car use, whether this means communal ownership (so that vehicles are shared by residents, and there are fewer stationary cars cluttering the neighbourhood) or communal use (where journeys are shared, reducing the number of empty seats on the road).

Communal ownership schemes are usually called 'car clubs'. Car club members typically pay a membership fee, and can then book any one of a number of vehicles parked in their locale. Car clubs range from relatively informal arrangements in rural areas, through to high-tech schemes in city centres. Some people join car clubs as a way of having a second car, some use it as an

alternative to owning their own vehicle, and some use it to gain access to a car for the first time. However, averaged out, a typical car club vehicle takes five private cars off the road, with substantial reductions in total mileage.

The largest car club in the UK is in Edinburgh, where there were over 300 members at the time of the study and about 150 people joining each year. This is comparable to the growth rate experienced during the early days of 'Mobility', the Swiss car club scheme which now has over 58,000 members.

Communal use, or 'car sharing' schemes, are also increasingly popular. One of the most successful is in Milton Keynes. Here, registered members are given individual, but linked permits. Cars displaying two of these linked permits are entitled to park free in prime spots in the central area. The scheme was launched on the same day that new parking charges were extended across the city. Nine months after launch, there were over 1,000 members, with more people joining every day.

The final type of 'smarter choice' policy is about ICT or 'tele-options'. Such options involve reducing the need to travel at all, given the possibilities created by telephones, e-mail, the internet, video-conferencing, webcams, etc. In particular, the *Smarter Choices* report looked at teleworking, teleconferencing, and home shopping.

In the UK, 'telework', where people work away from their workplace (for some or all of the time), has been championed by BT. However, BT is not the only organisation to be claiming that promoting telework has saved considerable office costs, and that teleworkers are more productive and take fewer sick days. One concern has been that reductions in commuting travel might be offset by more travel for other purposes (either by the teleworker or by other members of their household).

The *Smarter Choices* report examined 13 primary studies on this issue. Overall, these suggest that the net effect of teleworking is a major reduction in car use. In some cases, teleworkers even do less travelling for other purposes, as they start making more use of local shops and facilities.

Some local authorities are adopting a variant of telework whereby county council employees 'hot-desk' for some of the time at their local district office. Again, this usually cuts travel.

Teleconferencing, where business meetings are replaced by 'virtual meetings' (held by phone, video-link, or computer), has also been shown to reduce car use, with business travel typically falling by 10-30 per cent among companies that promote it. According to Face2face (a new company offering video-conferencing facilities in many UK town and city centres), a typical business trip costs over £2,000 per person and lasts over six hours, of which less than two are spent in the meeting itself. BT estimates that,

each year, its promotion of telephone conferencing is saving the company over £6 million pounds in petrol claims alone.

Finally, there are various ways in which home shopping schemes could cut traffic. Studies of grocery deliveries consistently suggest that customers who replace a car trip to the supermarket with a delivery vehicle visiting their home are likely to be reducing this traffic by 70-80 per cent. Meanwhile, for some other types of goods, a recent trial in Nottingham has shown that enabling customers to get items delivered to the local post office or a locker bank, rather than their home, could allow companies to schedule deliveries more efficiently and substantially reduce customer travel to collect unsuccessfully delivered goods.

In brief, 'smarter choice' policies are about public investment in a wide range of new measures, focusing on the specific reasons why people make journeys, and finding new ways for them to carry out activities, encouraging them to swap to alternative travel or enabling them to optimise their current travel behaviour. Given a supportive policy context, it seems that these measures could have an enormous impact on travel habits, helping to achieve real traffic reductions for a relatively low cost. It remains to be seen how vigorously national and local government will choose to pursue this path in the future. ■

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Notes

All unreferenced material is taken from the *Smarter Choices* report.⁴ All of the following publications are (or will be) downloadable from <http://www.dft.gov.uk>. The *Smarter Choices* report is located in the 'Sustainable travel' section of the site

- 1** *The Future of Transport* Department for Transport. The Stationery Office, London, 2004
- 2** *Feasibility of Road Pricing in the UK* Department for Transport, London, 2004
- 3** A. Montague et al.: *The Review of the Crossrail Business Case* Department for Transport, London, 2004
- 4** S. Cairns, L. Sloman, C. Newson, J. Anable, A. Kirkbride, and P. Goodwin: *Smarter Choices – Changing the Way We Travel* Final Report (Vol. 1), with accompanying volume of case studies. Department for Transport, London, 2004
- 5** S. Cairns, A. Davis, C. Newson, and C. Swiderska: *Making Travel Plans Work: Research Report* Linked publications on good practice guidance (*Lessons from UK Case Studies*), case study summaries, and *Using the Planning System to Secure Travel Plans* Department for Transport, London, 2002
- 6** S. Cairns, C. Newson, et al.: *Making School Travel Plans Work: Research Report* Linked volumes of good practice guidance and case study summaries. Department for Transport, London (forthcoming)