

## Transport – a political hot potato

The Sustainable Development Commission's assessment of the Government's progress towards sustainable development, *Shows promise, but must try harder*, acknowledges the Government's commitment, not least in creating a strategy and an annual assessment. The UK is one of the few governments anywhere to do so, but there are no easy routes to achieving sustainable development. Transport is one area where the complexities and difficulties are stark - it contributes 18% of our green house gas emissions and road and air transport are woven into the fabric of our lives.

"We are all reliant on transport as part of our everyday lives, so it is a subject close to our hearts and minds" said Dr John Disney a transport expert at Nottingham Trent University. He continued, "But only about half of drivers know how much they spend on fuel. Research by the RAC suggests that only if fuel doubled in price would 30% change to alternative forms of transport."

RAC spokesperson said, "Our research shows motorists have become anaesthetised to fuelbased tax – they just don't think about how much they end up paying. Road traffic congestion is reaching crisis point. Many parts of the country are simply grinding to a halt. Future taxation must be designed to do two things. First, raise enough revenue to fund a high quality transport system of roads, buses and trains. Second, include cost-based disincentives to dissuade motorists from using their cars for non-essential journeys. A simplified tax system which charges in a much more visible way – and one which is more difficult to pay than just filling your tank with petrol - needs to be implemented if we are to attempt to change the way journeys are made."

The statistics on transport are startling – 70% of us commute by car, a total of 78.5 billion miles per annum at a cost of £13.5b, while business travel adds a further 43.8b miles. The cost of congestion to business is £20b a year and must add significantly to HGV and LGV emissions which are nearly 40% of the total, but only 12% of vehicles. Commuting is the result of increased mobility and flexibility in the job market, while just in time manufacture and next day delivery to retailers and wholesalers increases freight journeys for which only road transport is flexible enough.

Nottingham and the County have an extensive travel to work area and the City is a retail and leisure centre which is serviced by goods vehicles which have restricted access to the centre. Pedestrianisation, the tram and traffic restrictions have made the City more pleasant for people. Bob Cullen, a Nottingham architect who has an in-depth knowledge of the city and concern for its future thinks that "Nottingham local government has done exceptionally well in striking a sensible and reasonable balance between restriction, price and freedom and I believe most people accept that without the Big Wheel policy, freedom of movement would be much more restricted and traffic conditions less bearable. Only in Nottingham and York has economic growth continued while traffic levels have dropped."

In his view "The existing pattern of our urban fabric, including Nottingham, is centralised with the construction during the last century of ring roads and suburbia. This infrastructure is so huge that it is unlikely to be changed fundamentally in the near future if ever while the motor car is our principal means of travel."

In Dr Disney adds that, "The tram has sustained its popularity as a consequence of its high reliability and low fares (except for short trips), but patronage stills falls well short of initial targets whilst its financial viability remains very dependent upon public subsidy. The bus sadly still remains the mode of last resort for many business people who would willingly pay more for a better service particularly to business locations outside the city centre. Business suits are still the exception on buses in Nottingham, in stark contrast to London and many European cities."

Bus fares have increased by 3% above inflation and we provide the lowest bus subsidies in Europe, so 68% of operating costs are met by fares and commercial sources. Although the

majority of the cost of fuel in the UK is tax, before the recent oil price increases, fuel costs had fallen in real terms by 6p per litre since 2000 with abandonment of the fuel escalator. Dr Disney sees "transport as a political hot potato with government, local government and transport professionals seek to steer a steady course between the icebergs formed by the pro-motoring and environmental lobbies and at least 70% of the electorate who have access to a car. Many motorists have now become very adept at legitimately dodging charges and restrictions and still find the car a more convenient mode than the bus."

Bob Cullen suggests car sharing, company travel plans and school buses which also served rural communities and retired people would have a dramatic impact on congestion. Most commuters are the only person in the car and we should cycle and walk on shorter journeys. But that we need to "establish a sort of environmental formula which balances amenity against traffic capacity, so that urban streets could remain civilised and not become simply unhealthy and undesirable corridors for traffic." Making our towns and cities green and pleasant places to live is add odds with our current utilisation of the internal combustion engine whether from road or air transport.

So what is the Government doing to promote more sustainable modes of transport? Rural transport tends to be forgotten, but in *Transport 2010* the Department for Transport's priorities for rural areas are: up to 50 new bypasses will be built to relieve communities blighted by congestion and pollution; at least an hourly bus service within a ten minute walk will be provided for a third more rural households and support will be provided for a wide range of flexible, community transport projects such as minibus and taxi-based schemes.

There is a £50 billion investment programme in rail which aims to move 10% of freight traffic to rail by 2010. The Chancellor made £100m available in 2000 for the Road Haulage Modernisation Fund to make road freight more sustainable through driver training, fuel economy advisors and retrofitting clean engines or purchasing clean HGVs. Manufacturers have reduced vehicle carbon dioxide emissions and if targets are met there will have been a 25% increase in car fuel efficiency over 1995 levels by 2008.

The 2001 OECD conference on Transport and Economic development suggested governments should "Encourage local distribution centres for local distribution and collection in smaller, more environmentally vehicles. These could be given priority in traffic management schemes and be equipped with IT to maximise load efficiency."

PeddleExpress based in Nottingham is doing just that. Originally PedalExpress provided a fast, reliable and flexible service with cycle couriers; the main customers were solicitors who needed documents transferred. The company is now part of a national and international distribution network from its base opposite the railway station. It provides *local distribution and collection in smaller, more environmentally vehicles* - they collect and deliver parcels by cycle, bus or an electric vehicle with carriers delivering to and collecting from their depot. With cycles with trailers they can take parcels up to 250 kgs, move small offices for customers and have transported a pantomime horse. Couriers take the train and their bike to deliver to further destinations including Paris and Brussels, still providing a same day solution. Nottingham City Council use PedalExpress for delivery of their internal mail to satellite offices. The IT aspects and priority in traffic management schemes have yet to be fulfilled; the tram system in Nottingham has not always resulted in cycle friendly road layouts or routes.

OECD suggested "Rather than look at a macro level, policy-makers should focus on careful micro analysis of individual projects. Transport infrastructure schemes must be assessed solely on the grounds of transport impact: attempting to justify them for wider economic reasons may lead to the wrong decisions. Non-transport benefits of transport investment will only be realised if certain market conditions are met, so predictions must be made carefully."

The Sustainable Development Commission suggests there should be discussions on how to achieve the desired level of access to facilities of all kind without multiplying transport needs through the planning process, encouraging mixed use zoning and development. Bob Cullen has the last word. "I believe that 'Middle England' is almost ready to give way a little on

absolute freedom of movement at all times for a more traffic free and sustainable environment. An environment where children can walk or cycle to school, where work is better related to home and can often be at home and sports, cultural and leisure activities are easily accessible by public transport and by car."

With thanks to Dr John Disney, Bob Cullen and Pedal Express for their thoughts and provocations. Rosamund Aubrey September 2004