

Summary paper: Mass transit and the efficient use of road space

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This paper summarises the key themes which were discussed at the second knowledge sharing event in the National Infrastructure Commission's 'Next Steps for Cities' programme. This paper has been developed in collaboration with the event speakers and city representatives across the country.

Ensuring public transport is able to meet the needs of the population is a key driver in making the best use of limited road space in built up areas, increasing transport capacity but also creating opportunities to redesign car-focused spaces to provide a more welcoming urban environment. While the discussions extended well beyond the key points listed below, seven key principles have been drawn out which aim to encompass the major discussion points and lessons learnt for mass transit and the efficient use of road space.

Key principles for mass transit and the efficient use of road space:

➤ **Planning for mass transit should be situated and communicated within the broader context of the local area**

Understanding how transport sits in the broader context of an area is crucial to delivering projects that can effectively meet local needs. This requires co-ordination at a policy level, understanding how transport is likely to impact on related policy areas such as skills, education and employment. This can mean supporting sustainable economic growth and regeneration, or providing high quality access and connectivity between different parts of a city. Co-ordination is also necessary across different geographies such as travel-to-work areas, which often means working across Local Authority boundaries.

This approach means that transport interventions can be used to open up opportunities for residents, linking the most deprived communities to key employment locations, retail facilities, leisure, health and education services. It can also support social inclusion by improving accessibility, as well as tackle public health issues such as air quality and obesity by increasing the mode share of cycling and walking.

While it can be tempting to see congestion as a catalyst for change in transport, it should not be relied upon as a main driver. Ultimately it is not possible to 'solve' congestion in public areas, but focussing on journey reliability and predictability for all road users offers a way to encourage individuals to use sustainable modes of transport and reduce pressure on road networks.

Ultimately, transport interventions should not be made for the sake of transport. Rather than the goal, improved transport should be seen as an enabler for improvements in skills provision, productivity and opportunities for communities.

➤ **The importance of a high-quality service**

Encouraging greater use of public transport requires services to be of a standard which makes them an attractive option to residents. Often bus services are perceived negatively in local areas, and this view can be entrenched and difficult to shift. To counter this, Local Authorities must work consistently and persistently to demonstrate the value that buses bring and the quality of the service they offer.

As part of communicating the benefits of travelling by bus, Local Authorities need demonstrate to their residents the benefits they will see from any improvements to services, particularly when those improvements may cause short-term disruptions. This communication and marketing element is key to the early success of any improvement works, but is particularly important when developing new services.

In terms of the services themselves, if Local Authorities hope to lure service users away from private transport options then they will need to provide public transport that is modern, safe, efficient and high-quality. The quality aspect is key here, and needs to be reflected in the infrastructure, operations and vehicles. While few Local Authorities have the resources to give serious consideration to mass transit options, they should ‘do bus, think tram’ when it comes to the quality of their services.

➤ **Now technologies: Seizing opportunities and mitigating risks**

Understanding new technologies and future-proofing services against them is an important element of planning for the longer-term. Some new technologies are already being used effectively across the country, such as smart ticketing, live travel information and low emission (hydrogen, hybrid or electric) buses. Demand responsive services are an example of one of the technological solutions currently being trialled, allowing services to adapt to reflect analytics of passenger use – though demand responsive services can be a challenge to run sustainably or profitably.

In accommodating these new technologies, Local Authorities should take care to avoid ‘static’ technology, and instead look to integrate more dynamic systems which more adaptable to future changes in mode use and journey preferences.

Technology poses risks as well as opportunities for public transport. This has been seen in London, where ride-sharing service Uber has eaten into bus patronage in the city. Accounting for the role of technology is important for ensuring that public transport can remain responsive to potential disruptors. If public services are unable to keep pace with technology there is a risk of falling patronage leading to reductions in services, which would have a knock on effect on people who cannot afford private transport.

➤ **Developing a strategy: Evidence and expertise**

Resources in Local Authorities are limited, but focussing on short term bids should not crowd out longer term, strategic projects. While it will not always be possible or preferable to make big changes to transport in one go, Authorities can instead stagger smaller changes to public transport to build towards longer-term strategic goals.

When embarking on a strategy, Local Authorities should not underestimate the time it takes to develop the skills and expertise in-house required to formulate effective strategies. It is also important to consider the biases present in internal departments that may impact on policy development and safeguard against them. Having a clear procurement strategy and programme management structure from the start of the process is a key part of keeping the project on track.

Proper evaluation of interventions is crucial to creating a robust evidence base which can be used to justify further investment. Evaluation should be a priority through every stage of the development and delivery, as well as on an ongoing basis once a service is running. There are a wide range of metrics that can serve as barometers for success, including; public opinion, passenger numbers, reliability, customer satisfaction, effect on congestion and air quality.

➤ **Role of partnerships**

The role of partnerships in developing transport services is crucial at almost every level. Early identification of key stakeholders followed by broad collaboration and engagement should be a key part of developing a strategy or project.

This can mean high-level strategic partnerships with neighbouring cities, allowing for a stronger combined bidding power on joint projects. This approach can be seen in action in collaborative work between Derby and Nottingham.

Local politics will always have an important role to play in decision-making, even in long-term projects with secure funding. Bringing political partners along through the process with clear and consistent communication can help to mitigate the risk political governance uncertainty, particularly in authorities that operate under elections by thirds. Strong leadership is critical in transport planning, allowing the prioritisation of wider, strategic concerns over smaller local objectives that offer less benefit. A weakness of bus services in the planning process is the flexibility – services can be cut out of ‘problem’ areas where there is a too much opposition, leading to patchy coverage.

Partnerships working at a more practical working level is important. Encouraging co-ordination between transport modes is essential to ensuring that any improvements contribute to a coherent transport network that complements other travel options rather than duplicating or undermining them. Partnerships between providers can offer similar benefits; encouraging providers to work together to provide a more seamless experience, eliminate overcrowding in competitive areas and enhance connectivity in under-served areas. Brighton & Hove is an area where this kind of partnership with private providers has yielded real benefits in terms of service reliability, customer satisfaction and footfall.

Emphasising the commercial benefits of mass transit can also help to bring the private sector on board and encourage businesses to take forward improvements and investment without reliance on public sector funding, though this can involve challenging conversations with providers.

➤ **The importance of reallocating road space in the city centre**

Reallocating road space is one of the key ways to drive reliability in public transport, improving punctuality and by extension the attractiveness of buses and similar services for passengers. It can also attract controversy, however, particularly political challenge from representatives who oppose any perceived effort to restrict private car users’ choices, or from road users who find the system confusing. Some cities have demonstrated how prioritisation can work well and deliver significant benefits, such as London – key to this success is applying new rules clearly and consistently to avoid confusion.

As such the case for road prioritisation needs to be made: effectively communicating the benefits of prioritisation and by extension sustainable public transport is key to meeting future network capacity needs and improving air quality. Local Authorities should not be afraid to be bold when putting forward these strategies; while they can lead to opposition, the benefits far outweigh the negatives.