

A REVIEW OF THE TRANSPORT ISSUES RAISED BY THE URBAN TASK FORCE REPORT "TOWARDS AN URBAN RENAISSANCE"

Introduction

The Urban Task Force (UTF) was established by the Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, in April 1998 following the publication of the Government policy paper "Planning for the Communities of the Future".¹ This paper stressed the importance of making towns and cities more sustainable while providing for the protection of the countryside. It also recommended that a Task Force should be established in order to identify the causes of urban decline and to determine how to reverse this trend.

Under the leadership of Lord Rogers of Riverside, the UTF engaged in a programme of consultation with public, private and voluntary sector groups as well as completing a programme of study tours to eleven urban areas in this country and a number of locations in the Netherlands, Spain, Germany and the United States. Following a halfway report in January 1999,² the UTF published its final report "Towards an Urban Renaissance" in June 1999.³

Speaking at a conference to launch the report, John Prescott praised its recommendations, saying that they were "comprehensive and forward-thinking", giving "the possible building blocks to make sustainable cities a reality".⁴ However, the report has been subjected to a certain amount of criticism concerning the validity of its recommendations, and it has also been suggested that it concentrates too much upon the architecture of residential neighbourhoods, paying insufficient attention to the broader issues. This paper considers whether such criticism is appropriate in the context of transport planning by comparing the recommendations of the report with current Government policies and other contemporary publications.

Summary of Transport Issues

The UTF report is organised into five sections. The first section provides an introduction to the current urban context and calls for the creation of compact urban developments served by integrated transport systems. The next two sections consider how urban regeneration can be achieved through increased urban management and facilitating the use of brownfield and under-utilised sites. The report concludes with two sections that consider how urban regeneration is to be funded and what needs to be done to sustain regeneration. Discussion of transport issues is limited to the first section.

The report begins by considering transport in general terms as part of the examination of how to improve the quality of urban design. The key element in this discussion is that cities that are dispersed over large areas of low-density development are unlikely to support forms of transport other than the car, while compact high-density cities, where the highest densities are centred on public transport nodes, may facilitate a reduction in car use.

In examining transport issues explicitly, the 1998 Transport White Paper⁵ is viewed as a useful starting point but not sufficient in itself. Although the introduction of Local Transport Plans (LTPs) is welcomed, it is recommended that these should be placed on a statutory footing and include targets for reductions in car journeys coupled with targets for increases in journeys made by more sustainable modes of transport. Such changes are to be achieved through improvements to the transport infrastructure, with priority given to pedestrians, cyclists and public transport users.

The report calls for cities to be designed on the basis of a 'permeable grid' system that allows efficient movement of goods and people between and within different areas. This grid should allow neighbourhoods to be fully integrated into their urban context by means of a clear structure of accessible routes. However, this grid should also allow for a hierarchy of needs. While major roads provide important connections between settlements, their function should change upon entering an urban area, with more emphasis given to the local environment and the needs of other users. In order to allow neighbourhoods to be reclaimed as 'social places', the formal introduction of Home Zones is called for,

where pedestrians have priority and vehicle speeds are reduced through the use of lower speed limits and traffic calming measures.

To facilitate an increase in the number of pedestrian journeys, the report recommends identifying which locations people wish to walk between and responding by creating direct and attractive routes where pedestrians are given priority over all other modes of transport. Similarly, in order to increase the number of cyclist journeys, the report recommends that comprehensive cycle networks should be developed, which are continuous along their whole length and which either segregate cyclists from the main carriageway or ensure sufficient width where segregation is not possible. Adequate levels of cycle storage should be provided at all major locations. In order to achieve these improvements, the report recommends that public funding and planning permissions for urban development and highway projects should be made conditional on priority being given to the needs of pedestrians and cyclists.

It is recognised that our current urban public transport systems are often not of sufficient quality to represent a viable alternative to the car and the report calls on public transport operators to provide an improved service. While the publication of the Government bus strategy⁶ is welcomed, particularly the provision of statutory backing for Quality Partnerships between local authorities and bus operators and the introduction of Quality Contracts, the report questions whether these measures will prove to be sufficient. It recommends that if bus services have not improved substantially within five years, a regulated franchise system should be introduced in all urban areas.

In addition to improvements in the level and quality of bus services, the report calls for improved access to public transport and increased development in close proximity to existing public transport nodes. The report also calls for improvements in the provision of information, especially real time information, and increased use of more innovative solutions such as the introduction of light rail or guided bus schemes. It recommends that LTPs should set targets for public transport including maximum walking distance to bus stops, quality and provision of services, and availability of cycle storage facilities. In providing improved public transport systems, the report also recognises the importance of considering the needs of poorer residents and recommends that low income housing estates should be connected to local centres by frequent, accessible and affordable public transport.

In reducing car use, the report calls for measures introduced in the White Paper,⁵ such as road charging, dedicated multi-occupancy vehicle lanes and workplace parking charges, to be introduced as quickly as possible. However, it also recognises that for these to be efficient, LTPs should address travel needs that are not currently possible by public transport, such as orbital journeys. In addition, the report notes that for reductions in car use to be achieved, 'predict and provide' parking must be abandoned. It recommends that a maximum standard of one car parking space per dwelling should be introduced for new urban residential developments, maximum private non-residential (PNR) parking standards should be introduced and plans to tax workplace charging should be extended to all forms of PNR parking, hypothecated to transport or urban regeneration schemes.

If all of these improvements are to be achieved, sufficient resources will need to be made available. The report recommends a three pronged approach to this. First, it calls for a minimum of 65% of public expenditure on transport to be committed to programmes prioritising walking, cycling and public transport. Second, it calls for priority to be given to the public transport needs of regeneration areas. Third, it recommends that Regional Development Agencies and other regeneration bodies should be allowed to provide funding for appropriate transport measures. Although the main funding issues are examined in the penultimate section of the report in terms of using public investment and fiscal measures to lever in greater amounts of private investment, transport funding is not considered explicitly.

Current Government Transport Policies

In assessing the validity of the UTF's recommendations in the context of transport planning, it is important to consider how they relate to current Government transport policies. The most relevant indications of these are contained within the White Paper,⁵ the guidance on LTPs⁷, PPG13⁸ and the 10 Year Plan.⁹

The White Paper, "A New Deal for Transport: Better for Everyone",⁵ was published in July 1998, building on the previous Government's Green Paper¹⁰ by recognising the need to improve public transport and to

reduce dependency on the car. Unlike the UTF report, the White Paper is primarily concerned with transport issues and although it does consider the linkages between transport policy and land use planning, these are considered at a relatively strategic level. Although the White Paper clearly laid the building blocks for the UTF's transport recommendations, the instances where the UTF report advocates action over and above that called for by the White Paper are few, with much of the consideration of transport issues far less detailed.

One of the 'daughter documents' arising from the White Paper was "Guidance on Full Local Transport Plans".⁷ LTPs were introduced in the White Paper as a replacement for the Transport Policies and Programme (TPP) system, allowing Government funding to be awarded on the basis of the contribution of transport schemes to authorities' overarching economic, social and environmental objectives, rather than simply on the basis of transport objectives. Because the emphasis in the Guidance is on transport in a wider context than that contained in the White Paper, especially in the area of urban planning, it is closer in scope to the UTF report. Although the exact mechanics of urban design are not touched upon in the Guidance, the discussion concerning transport issues is again more detailed than that in the UTF report. Nevertheless, because the Guidance builds on the discussion in the White Paper, its contents are in line with the UTF's transport recommendations.

National planning guidance is provided in the form of Planning Policy Guidance (PPG) notes, the most relevant of which is PPG13 (Transport),⁸ recently revised in the light of the White Paper. The objectives of PPG13 are to integrate land use planning and transport in order to promote more sustainable transport choices, promote accessibility by public transport, walking and cycling and reduce the need to travel. Because of the emphasis on land use planning, PPG13 is the closest in scope of the transport policy documents to the UTF report, especially if it is read in conjunction with PPG3 (Housing)¹¹, PPG6 (Town Centres and Retail Developments),¹² PPG11 (Regional Planning)¹³ and PPG12 (Development Plans).¹⁴ Indeed, many of the planning policies stated in PPG13 echo the aims of the UTF, namely, to increase the intensity of development at locations accessible by public transport, walking and cycling, to use parking policies to promote sustainable transport choices and to give priority to people over ease of traffic movement in town centres. However, the purpose of PPGs, by definition, is to set out Government planning policies and, hence, there is less consideration of the details of urban design than in the UTF report.

The recently published 10 Year Plan⁹ sets out how the Government aims to achieve the policies presented in the White Paper. This document is of particular interest because it details the level of public and private funding that the Government feels is required for these aims to be accomplished. However, the 10 Year Plan does not meet the UTF recommendation that a minimum of 65% of public expenditure on transport should be committed to programmes prioritising walking, cycling and public transport. Although it does commit 67% of all expenditure on transport to schemes that are not directly road-based, much of this funding is expected to come from private investment and, as with the UTF report, there is little discussion concerning how private funding is to be achieved. In addition, while the 10 Year Plan does flesh out much of the discussion contained in the White Paper, it has been criticised for not considering the role of land use planning in sufficient detail.¹⁵ As a result, although the 10 Year Plan provides the funding to facilitate some of the UTF's recommendations, the emphasis of the two documents is at odds concerning how changes in travel behaviour are to be achieved.

The discussion above highlights the main difference between the transport policy documents and the UTF report: the scope of the disciplines considered and the level and complexity of the associated analysis. While the transport policy documents, by definition, consider disciplines in terms of their interaction with transport policy, the UTF report considers a wider range of disciplines in terms of their interaction with planning in a specifically urban context. Therefore, although the UTF's transport recommendations are largely in accordance with current transport policies, they often lack the supporting detail showing how these recommendations are to be achieved. As a result, if they are considered solely in the context of the report, the UTF's transport recommendations tend to appear somewhat naïve or simplistic. However, it is worth remembering that some of the recommendations of the 10 Year Plan⁹ have been subjected to similar criticisms by Phil Goodwin¹⁶ and it is significant that a report written outside the confines of the transport industry is able to make any recommendations concerning changes to transport policy.

Other Contemporary Publications

It is also important to look beyond transport policy and compare and contrast how other contemporary publications have dealt with transport planning as one of the inter-related disciplines involved in urban planning and design.

As the publication that launched the UTF, the Government policy paper "Planning for the Communities of the Future"¹ deserves further consideration. This document, which represents the Government's response to consultation arising from the previous Government's Green Paper,¹⁷ was concerned with finding environmentally sensitive solutions to future housing requirements. Although published prior to the 1998 Transport White Paper,⁵ the document contains some introductory discussion concerning the links between sustainable patterns of development and integrated transport policy, later expanded in the White Paper and the UTF report. It also provides the cornerstones for many of the UTF's recommendations in a number of other fields including urban design, urban planning and the use of fiscal incentives.

A key publication in the field of urban design was "Time for Design: Good Practice in Building, Landscape and Urban Design",¹⁸ an English Partnerships (EP) document first published in 1996 and then revised in 1998. Although this document only touches upon transport issues and, indeed, it acknowledges that EP does not usually have a direct role to play in this area, it does emphasise the importance of 'designing in' a sustainable pattern of transport options that asserts the primacy of pedestrians, cyclists and public transport users. This fact, along with the emphasis placed on well designed and fully integrated mixed use developments as a tool in urban regeneration, clearly highlights "Time for Design" as an important precursor to the UTF report.

EP followed this document in 1998 with "Making Places",¹⁹ published jointly with the Urban Villages Forum (UVF). Subtitled "A Guide to Good Practice in Undertaking Mixed Development Schemes", this document was published as part of the "Making Mixed Use Happen" initiative promoted by EP and the UVF. The Guide builds on the design advice contained in "Time for Design" by additionally considering the promotion, planning and financing of mixed use developments.

Also published in 1998, and similar in scope to "Making Places" was the Government policy paper "Planning for Sustainable Development: Towards Better Practice".²⁰ The emphasis of this document is on urban planning rather than urban design, with discussion concerning the importance of the planning system in promoting sustainable land use patterns. Although transport issues are only touched upon in both "Making Places" and "Planning for Sustainable Development", the wider scope of disciplines considered means that if these two documents are read in conjunction, they represent possibly the most detailed description of contemporary thinking in the fields of urban design and urban planning prior to the UTF report.

It is interesting to compare the above documents, published before the UTF report, with "By Design - Urban Design in the Planning System: Towards Better Practice"²¹ and the "Urban Design Compendium",²² which were published subsequently. Both of these documents, which were intended to complement each other, acknowledge the importance of the UTF report and, in particular, its emphasis on the importance of good urban design. However, while these reports have tended to build on the UTF's recommendations in most areas, their treatment of transport issues is for the most part limited to discussion concerning the design of transport facilities.

An important recent publication, and one that approaches the issue of regeneration more from the viewpoint of transport planning, is "Transport Development Areas",²³ published by the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors. Based on research by planning, environmental and transport consultants Symonds Group, property and planning consultants Weatherall Green and Smith and urban design consultants gal.com, the report represents a milestone in this field in that it would appear to be the first publication to consider in any detail the importance of public transport in supporting high density mixed used development and how Government policy could be adjusted to promote this. While a number of contemporary publications, the UTF report included, have recognised the link between transport provision and urban renaissance, "Transport Development Areas" shifts the emphasis from architectural issues towards transport planning issues. As with the two urban design guides above, this publication acknowledges the UTF report and builds on its findings.

While the long awaited Urban White Paper²⁴ also acknowledges the UTF, the extent to which it provides discussion over and above that contained in the UTF report, or even on a par with it, is open to debate. Contained in an Annex to the main document are the Government's responses to each of the UTF's 105 main recommendations. While in a number of instances the document appears to accept the recommendations, careful reading of the text indicates that they have often only been accepted at a diluted level. Far more of the recommendations have either been rejected or set aside for further consideration at a later date. However, while the Urban White Paper may not go as far as the UTF would have hoped, it does seek to address many of the same issues as those considered by the UTF and, as the first Urban White Paper in over twenty years, its publication is to be applauded, if only cautiously.

It is apparent from the above discussion that, with the possible exception of the Urban White Paper²⁴, each successive contemporary publication has aimed to build upon the recommendations of earlier work. However, the UTF report is worthy of note because while the number of disciplines considered has tended to increase with successive publications, the UTF report is the only publication in the field, with the exception of "Transport Development Areas",²³ to consider transport issues in any detail. As a result, if these two publications are taken together, they provide the most comprehensive discussion currently available concerning how transport planning can contribute to urban renaissance.

Discussion

I believe that the UTF report is the most important contemporary publication in the field of urban planning and design for two reasons. First, the report benefits from the fact that it is not a Government policy document. In reviewing the recent Urban White Paper,²⁴ Sir Peter Hall made the following comments: "This isn't policy, this is shameless electioneering. Too often over the last four years, Government policy on land and development has consisted of bombastic rhetoric empty of real substance, followed by surrender to any and every vested interest, real or imaginary."²⁵ While these comments are hardly insightful, they are both accurate and damning, and they could be extended to cover Government policy in other areas, particularly transport.

Although the UTF report was produced for the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR), it is not a Government document and, hence, it has not been constrained by wider political considerations. As a result, the UTF were able to raise a number of important issues and make recommendations for how these should be tackled without needing to rely on 'bombastic rhetoric'. Particularly telling is the Government's response to the UTF's call for a minimum of 65% of public expenditure on transport to be committed to programmes prioritising walking, cycling and public transport, as detailed in the Urban White Paper Annex.²⁴ This somewhat supercilious response explains that "the Government does not propose to set a specific target for the proportion of public expenditure going to particular modes" but that the 10 Year Plan⁹ "stresses the importance of walking, cycling and public transport". The emptiness of this statement is highlighted by recent comments made by Lord Macdonald regarding the Government's decision not to publish a walking strategy.²⁶

The second strength of the UTF report is the way in which it considers the issue of urban renaissance in a holistic manner. I recently attended a lecture that promised to examine the importance of transport schemes in achieving regeneration. As is too often the case within the transport planning discipline, much of the discussion centred on how urban regeneration would follow the provision of any new transport system in an inextricable fashion, with only limited consideration of the fact that transport planning is one of many inter-linked elements within the field of urban regeneration. If, as transport professionals, we are to contribute fully to the debate, we must look beyond the traditionally narrow confines of the industry and consider the wider implications of what we are doing.

Although transport planners have begun to look outside these confines, through the introduction of LTPs as a replacement for TPPs for example, we would do well to follow the example set within the field of urban planning and design. While the instances where the UTF report advocates action over and above that called for by the 1998 Transport White Paper⁵ have largely been overlooked, the last few years have seen urban planning and design publications building on the UTF's recommendations and broadening in scope to include an increasing number of disciplines. Unfortunately, without the full contribution of transport planning professionals, the transport recommendations of these publications have tended to lack detailed supporting analysis and, hence, credibility. However, until we become more proactive in

contributing to studies of this type, it would be unreasonable for a transport planner to comment on the validity of any recommendations arising from the research.

One of the overarching themes of the current Government's policies is the importance of 'joined-up thinking', as exemplified by their formation of the DETR. However, the field of transport planning would appear to be an area where 'joined-up thinking' has yet to be fully realised. PPG1 (General Policy and Principles)²⁷ defines urban design as "the relationship between different buildings; the relationship between buildings and the streets, squares, parks, waterways and other spaces which make up the public domain; the nature and quality of the public domain itself; the relationship of one part of a village, town or city with other parts; and the patterns of movement and activity which are thereby established; in short, the complex relationships between all the elements of built and unbuilt space." Clearly, transport planning has an important role to play within the confines of this definition.

On a more positive note, the recent publication of "Transport Development Areas"²³ represents a milestone in this field, even if the Government has chosen not to make explicit reference to Transport Development Areas (TDAs) in the revised PPG11¹³ and has only referred briefly to TDAs in a footnote of the revised PPG13.⁸ Indeed, it is telling that this research, although supported by the DETR, was commissioned by the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, an organisation outside the recognised confines of the transport planning profession. However, it is to be hoped that subsequent research continues in this vein, such that the recent imbalance in emphasis towards mainly architectural aspects of urban planning and design is corrected, and that in the future, transport planning is allowed to play a full role in contributing towards an urban renaissance.

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Notes

Andy Pike is a Principal Consultant with FaberMaunsell in Altrincham and may be contacted at andrew.pike@fabermaunsell.com. He would like to thank the Transport Planning Society for giving him the opportunity to write this paper and acknowledge the assistance of Peter Hine of Symonds Group and Nigel Robson of Sinclair Knight Merz. The opinions expressed within the paper are purely those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of either the Transport Planning Society or FaberMaunsell.