

Transport Planning Society

TRANSPORT PLANNING SOCIETY (TPS)

Alternatives to Business Travel

Response to DfT consultation

The Transport Planning Society has consistently supported the types of measures often referred to as “Smarter Choices” although this is a very broad term. Our members, who provide services to private and public sectors, have found such initiatives effective and lower in cost than many large scale infrastructure projects. We welcome the level of specificity applied in this case and hope it leads to better guidance on the impact of this measure, as well as the other so called “soft” interventions.

It is generally the case that mature transport networks need managing rather than large scale expansion and our members, for example in last year’s survey of their views, made clear that behaviour change was their number one priority for transport spending in the next 5 years (61.2%), followed by walking and cycling (55.0%) and road maintenance (56.5%).

In support of this approach, the same survey showed strong support for demand management, including Lorry Road User Charging, increasing the scope and level of aviation taxes, national road user charging, and levies on parking spaces.

On the issues raised in this consultation we wish to offer views as the key UK institution which has its main focus on transport planning. We will address the questions you raise in this context, but also as users and potential users of technology for remote meetings, seminars and conferences. Our direct experience of this has informed this submission.

Your questions covered four key areas:

- a. Home working and remote working;
- b. Flexible working and staggered hours (in order to reduce travel during peak periods);
- c. Teleconferencing and videoconferencing;
- d. Any other alternatives to travel which can help reduce work-related travel.

a) *Home working and remote working*

We have observed among our own members, and their clients, considerable progress in allowing home working which would otherwise be done at a screen in a workplace. In many instances this is more efficiently undertaken away from

everyday distractions. Some firms feel that there is a domino effect of everyone wanting to take advantage of this, but there are many examples of this being undertaken successfully, leading to lower requirements for office space (for example through hot desking). We have no comprehensive data to offer, but it seems no coincidence that traffic levels in London, where such initiatives have been strongly promoted and are now widespread, have fallen at a time of rising population and employment. Government action on this other than monitoring and promotion is probably not required, and issues such as insurance cover have mostly been addressed.

It is important, however, to distinguish between home working and remote working. The former may include writing reports, designing or analysing data. The latter includes more innovative schemes such as “virtual call centres” where people at home (or another remote location) log on to the centre and then act as though they were physically present. Hours of work can be booked in advance or offered in real time to match demand. This is an area where we do not know of large scale examples, and the Government should consider piloting such an approach, for example in relation to transport based call centres such as those required for demand responsive services. There is no need for the people who do this to sit in the same room as the network server which is actually doing the route choice and booking.

In one sense there is already widespread remote working – many people do it when they travel between our towns and cities by train. Many salespeople and service engineers use the same technology out on the road which links them to the main host computer back at their base.

b) Flexible working and staggered hours

One of the oddities of transport planning is that the costs of congestion to businesses are often estimated in billions, or even tens of billions, of pounds, yet companies are reluctant to avoid this by the implementation of large scale flexi-time for their staff. Our view is that it is possible that the costs of congestion are somewhat exaggerated, or perhaps more likely there is a fear factor in terms of managing such a change. It is clear that there are managerial overheads and that in some ways home working is far simpler and easier to come to terms with. This is probably why forms of home working have become more popular more quickly than staggering hours. The possibilities offered by remote working may address this in a way that businesses find easier to manage, and there is a need for piloting and dissemination of good practice.

c) Teleconferencing and videoconferencing

Despite some publicity, including the use of the term “telepresence” to describe the latest more user friendly versions of remote meetings, this is almost certainly an area where there is scope for expansion. As ever the “push-pull” effect is

important and in one aspect business travel by air is becoming less attractive, at the same time that rail travel has become more reliable, and business friendly, through wi-fi and laptop power points in most carriages.

For those who still travel by air, the recession has accelerated the trend of trading down, both to economy class and to budget airlines. The former is clear from the CAA passenger surveys and is shown in the table which follows.

Table 1

Cabin choice by business travellers

	1996	2007	2009
North America			
First/Business	38%	27%	16%
Premium Economy	N/A	14%	17%
Economy	62%	59%	67%
Other long haul			
First/Business	33%	24%	13%
Premium Economy	N/A	8%	8%
Economy	67%	67%	79%
Short haul			
First/Business	41%	9%	5%
Economy	59%	91%	95%

Source: CAA, 2010

There are serious long term implications for airlines' cost structures, but the key issue for this consultation is that business travel by air has, from the individual's point of view, become a lot less comfortable. Further changes in aviation taxes, linked to investment allowances for telepresencing equipment, could tip the balance in favour of such technology. It is of course important that it becomes widespread in order that a critical mass is reached and most people will be able to participate. That point has not been reached for most companies, although some larger firms have implemented this internally.

We consider that the Government has a role in setting the tax structure as above as well as generally promoting this approach.

d) Any other alternatives to travel which can help reduce work-related travel

TPS is well known for its views on the necessity of linking transport and land use planning and this topic is highly relevant here. It will be critical to locate businesses in town and city centres, close to each other, in developments which achieve high densities. This means they can be served by public transport, and equally importantly can be served by local catchments for employment which in turn means high levels of walking and cycling. As well sustainable travel, this means lower requirements for car parking, which not only supports higher density, but reduces the land costs for the companies involved and local communities.

Thus we strongly support the use of land use planning to create the conditions for businesses to interact more easily and achieve the agglomeration benefits which are often talked about, but little understood.

For this reason we are concerned about any relaxation of controls on locations on out of town or edge of town developments, and on maximum levels of parking. Levies such as that proposed for Nottingham, combined with parking controls and positive investment in public transport, such as the tram, provide an example of how a coherent local policy can support this. It should be noted that low levels of parking in new development, and a parking levy on existing spaces, is also an example of “nudging” towards the alternative of home/remote working.

For this reason the Government must ensure that it does not inhibit in any way the creation of developments with low levels of parking and high business densities. An example is the risk with the growth of Local Enterprise Partnerships, where the reasons for parking controls and demand management may not be understood (there is a loss of knowledge issue here too).

Another important example is the creation of Enterprise Zones. Without becoming involved in any of the economic arguments about abstraction or additionality, it will be critical that these do not allow a car park dominated, low density, off centre series of developments which will not only generate unsustainable patterns of commuting, but also unsustainable patterns of business travel.

Recommendations for Government action

1 DfT needs to monitor home working, and pilot innovative schemes for remote working, starting in transport. Good practice examples of the latter need to be created and then publicised.

2 The Treasury needs to work with the grain by raising aviation taxes and providing tax incentives for telepresence equipment to be purchased by companies. This could be linked publicly to make the point.

3 DfT should work with BIS to create pilot schemes to make such equipment available in centres where smaller firms cannot justify the expense individually. This could include a one off competition for the best (and most widely compatible) App – mobile phone providers have already started to experiment with them. DfT and Government generally could also take a lead in doing so for their own staff.

4 DfT and CLG need to act together ensure that low density, car park dominated developments are not the counterproductive result of “relaxing” controls generally and specifically in the creation of Enterprise Zones (EZs). The latter must set stringent targets for sustainable travel and ensure their achievement by low levels of permitted parking. This must be included in Local Development Orders whether they are used for EZs or in other circumstances.

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