Smarter Choices - Changing the Way We Travel - Summary

Summary

In recent years, there has been growing interest in a range of initiatives, which are now widely described as 'soft' transport policy measures. These seek to give better information and opportunities, aimed at helping people to choose to reduce their car use while enhancing the attractiveness of alternatives. They are fairly new as part of mainstream transport policy, mostly relatively uncontroversial, and often popular. They include:

- Workplace and school travel plans;
- Personalised travel planning, travel awareness campaigns, and public transport information and marketing;
- Car clubs and car sharing schemes;
- Teleworking, teleconferencing and home shopping.

This report draws on earlier studies of the impact of soft measures, new evidence from the UK and abroad, case study interviews relating to 24 specific initiatives, and the experience of commercial, public and voluntary stakeholders involved in organising such schemes. Each of the soft factors is analysed separately, followed by an assessment of their combined potential impact.

The assessment focuses on two different policy scenarios for the next ten years. The **'high intensity'** scenario identifies the potential provided by a significant expansion of activity to a much more widespread implementation of present good practice, albeit to a realistic level which still recognises the constraints of money and other resources, and variation in the suitability and effectiveness of soft factors according to local circumstances. The **'low intensity'** scenario is broadly defined as a projection of the present (2003-4) levels of local and national activity on soft measures.

The main features of the high intensity scenario would be

- A reduction in peak period urban traffic of about 21% (off-peak 13%);
- A reduction of peak period non-urban traffic of about 14% (off-peak 7%);
- A nationwide reduction in all traffic of about 11%.

These projected changes in traffic levels are quite large (though consistent with other evidence on behavioural change at the individual level), and would produce substantial reductions in congestion. However, this would tend to attract more car use, by other people, which could offset the impact of those who reduce their car use unless there are measures in place to prevent this. Therefore, those experienced in the implementation of soft factors locally usually emphasise that success depends on some or all of such supportive policies as re-allocation of road capacity and other measures to improve public transport service levels, parking control, traffic calming, pedestrianisation, cycle networks, congestion charging or other traffic restraint, other use of transport prices and fares, speed regulation, or stronger legal enforcement levels. The report also records a number of suggestions about local and national policy measures that could facilitate the expansion of soft measures.

The effects of the low intensity scenario, in which soft factors are not given increased policy priority compared with present practice, are estimated to be considerably less than those of the high intensity scenario, including a reduction in peak period urban traffic of about 5%, and a nationwide reduction in all traffic of 2%-3%. These smaller figures also assume that sufficient other supporting policies are used to prevent induced traffic from eroding the effects, notably at peak periods and in congested

conditions. Without these supportive measures, the effects could be lower, temporary, and perhaps invisible.

Previous advice given by the Department for Transport in relation to multi-modal studies was that soft factors might achieve a nationwide traffic reduction of about 5%. The policy assumptions underpinning this advice were similar to those used in our low intensity scenario: our estimate is slightly less, but the difference is probably within the range of error of such projections.

The public expenditure cost of achieving reduced car use by soft measures, on average, is estimated at about 1.5 pence per car kilometre, i.e. £15 for removing each 1000 vehicle kilometres of traffic. Current official practice calculates the benefit of reduced traffic congestion, on average, to be about 15p per car kilometre removed, and more than three times this level in congested urban conditions. Thus every £1 spent on well-designed soft measures could bring about £10 of benefit in reduced congestion alone, more in the most congested conditions, and with further potential gains from environmental improvements and other effects, provided that the tendency of induced traffic to erode such benefits is controlled. There are also opportunities for private business expenditure on some soft measures, which can result in offsetting cost savings.

Much of the experience of implementing soft factors is recent, and the evidence is of variable quality. Therefore, there are inevitably uncertainties in the results. With this caveat, the main conclusion is that, provided they are implemented within a supportive policy context, soft measures can be sufficiently effective in facilitating choices to reduce car use, and offer sufficiently good value for money, that they merit serious consideration for an expanded role in local and national transport strategy.

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