

Commission on Travel Demand Response from Campaign for Better Transport

Campaign for Better Transport and its predecessor Transport 2000 have been concerned with the issue of travel demand for many years. We have been critical of traditional approaches to travel demand, and have argued that they miss key trends and also treat demand as far more fixed than it is. We have also argued that on sustainability grounds past trends in travel need to change. We therefore welcome this Commission and are keen to help it with its deliberations.

The main areas where we believe traditional approaches to forecasting demand are vulnerable are as follows:

- Land use change: traditional modelling and forecasting methods ignore the influence on travel demand of different patterns of development and land use, and the feedback between transport investment and development. Yet there is good evidence that the siting and design of development can have huge influence on travel demand¹
- Provision of transport choices: traditional methods tend to downplay the importance of travel choices. The traditional DfT line is that “road and rail largely serve different markets”, and we see even now that the development of a road and a railway between Oxford and Cambridge is being pursued separately. Projections for HS2 assume very little mode shift from car and air, despite the step change in speed and capacity it represents. The National Networks National Policy Statement states that even if rail freight were doubled it would only reduce road freight by 5%, and a similar statement is made for passenger rail. Work we have commissioned, some of it with DfT, has shown that this is wrong, and that for specific corridors and areas a growth in railfreight could reduce road freight significantly. Similarly, we have seen that traditional rail forecasting tends to systematically underestimate demand for new/reopened lines and stations.
- Networks: traditional methods tend to focus on individual links rather than networks and door to door journeys. This means that when there are improvements to whole networks traditional methods will miss their significance. This is one of the factors in London where there have been large changes in demand outside the forecasts. This is not just about the provision of infrastructure, but about pricing. The move towards smartcards, zonal fares and network-wide ticketing leads to effects entirely outside traditional methodology. Simplification of pricing, especially on public transport, drives business. The inclusion of national rail services in the London Oystercard, and the provision of flat £2 fares offer in Merseyside for young people, were both predicted to result in revenue loss, but in fact produced gains. Conversely, the effect of provision of, say, extra motorway capacity will miss the effect on surrounding road networks.

¹ See e.g. http://www.bettertransport.org.uk/sites/default/files/research-files/Masterplanning_Checklist_2008.pdf

- Economic and demographic trends: income and wealth distribution between age groups (young/old), between sexes and ethnic groups and between different types of area, will have big impacts on travel demand but have not been well studied. Consequently measures that seek to help lower income groups of all kinds have a poor analytical base and the implications for travel demand have not been well studied. Similarly the impacts of, for example, the expansion of higher education, the loans used to fund this, the high housing costs faced by young people and the casualization of employment are together having an impact on travel demand by young people.
- Technology: this is one area where the vulnerability of traditional methods of forecasting and modelling travel demand is already apparent. Retail trips are already falling and van travel increasing with the growth of internet shopping. As already noted, smartcard and mobile phone technology is changing travel behaviour with respect to public transport. Information availability through apps like citymapper and many others make choices much more transparent. There are various other technology developments under the broad headings of big data, mobility as a service and connected/ autonomous vehicles which separately and together have the potential to change travel demand and travel behaviour dramatically. It is not clear that conventional methodologies can handle the very wide range of uncertainties that these technologies imply. One outcome that is almost certainly ruled out is that current travel patterns will continue – in other words, that current car-based mobility, including current occupancy levels and trips, will continue and grow, but merely in electric and autonomous rather than piloted vehicles with petrol or diesel engines. Yet that seems to be the default assumption of transport professionals and policymakers.
- Behaviour can be changed by policy: conventional methodologies link travel demand to income, GDP and motoring costs, leaving little hope for policies (other perhaps than national road pricing) to change demand. Yet it is clear that policies have changed travel behaviour. These policies include national measures e.g. (changes in company car tax) and local (smartcards, parking policies, provision of cycle infrastructure and better/ cheaper public transport). There is significant literature around this, including smarter choices and the Local Sustainable Transport Fund analysis.

From this, we suggest that there are widespread influences on travel demand that are not captured, or captured poorly, in conventional methodology.

DfT has recognised some of this and is researching some of it. The introduction of scenarios (in NRTF 2015) has started to address some of these points. However there is little sign yet that the uncertainties around future travel demand are being dealt with systematically. More importantly, there is almost no sign of these uncertainties being reflected in the development and appraisal of schemes on the ground. The schemes now forming part of the Road Investment Strategy or the local growth funds have no futureproofing. While there is some questioning of convention and development of alternative approaches in city regions and bodies like Transport for the North, most strategic and scheme planning is still being done assuming that past trends continue. These assumptions in turn feed into appraisal, especially projected time savings for travellers, which are likely to be wholly erroneous (and of course have been subject to other criticisms). This is likely to involve a significant waste of public spending, aside from the sustainability arguments that the Commission sets out so cogently.

DfT staff do not need to go far to see how vulnerable conventional forecasting of travel demand is. The ground floor of their offices in Marsham Street/ Horseferry Road in London used to be occupied by a car showroom, which would fit with the old style traffic forecasts. This has now been replaced by a

Sainsbury's local store, which is a feature of the retail changes unforeseen by those forecasts, and a kitchen furniture showroom to serve the city centre residential developments also outside the old forecasts.

In summary we welcome the Commission, have identified some of the issues it might look at, and believe that the best way forward is to develop much better scenario planning reflecting a wide range of uncertainties.

February 2017

Stephen Joseph
Campaign for Better Transport

Campaign for Better Transport's vision is a country where communities have affordable transport that improves quality of life and protects the environment. Achieving our vision requires substantial changes to UK transport policy which we aim to achieve by providing well-researched, practical solutions that gain support from both decision-makers and the public.

16 Waterside, 44-48 Wharf Road, London N1 7UX
Registered Charity 1101929. Company limited by guarantee, registered in England and Wales: 4943428