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# Smarter Travel, car restriction and reticence: Understanding the process in Ireland's active travel towns

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the factors that precluded the introduction of car restrictive policies in two towns participating in Ireland's Smarter Travel programme to promote sustainable travel. A total of 14 semi-structured interviews were conducted with the project coordinators, community advocates for active travel and retail traders (shops and small businesses).

The results indicated that the Smarter Travel co-ordinators were inexperienced in using a full range of pricing, programming and policy measures specific to active travel. A more significant factor was the power of the trader lobby. In the town with the lower population density, car accessibility in the urban centre was perceived by retail traders to be directly associated with retail turnover. In the town with the higher population density, retail traders stated that car accessibility created an illusion of vibrancy that provided security to the retail sector. The retail traders disliked the local authority's didactic approach to consultation and this dissonance manifested itself in displays of power against the local authority and not necessarily against Smarter Travel per se. Both local authorities struggled to sell the business case for car restrictive policies to the retail traders. They also failed to engage the silent majority in the wider community to act as advocates for active travel.

The wider implications for the implementation of Smarter Travel policy are presented. It is important to create community support for active travel interventions by forming 'town user' forums and active travel lobby groups and making the local media partners in the project. Training and support should be provided to local authorities to deliver a more comprehensive suite of measures. A toolkit should be developed for local authorities to create a business case for introducing car restrictive measures. Incentives such as improvements to the public realm and accessibility for cyclists should be introduced before car restrictive measures. Car restrictive measures should be introduced incrementally such as introducing temporary pedestrianization or gradually reducing parking supply thereby demonstrating the benefits of the measure to stakeholders.

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## 1. Introduction

Ireland is a car dependent society with one of the lowest levels of active transport across the entire EU (Central Statistics Office, 2012; TNS Opinion and Social, 2013). There was a 140% increase in the number of private cars between 1990 and 2013. The national prevalence of active transport has decreased dramatically since the

1980s. Even more recently the Irish census data collected in 2006 and 2011 (Central Statistics Office, 2012) has indicated that active transport to work and education (primary, secondary and tertiary) has decreased further between both time points. In 2009, the Irish government published the country's first sustainable transport policy (Department of Transport, 2009). This policy was the catalyst for the establishment of three 'Smarter Travel Areas' outside of the greater Dublin area. A total of €21.7 million was divided between the three 'Smarter Travel Areas' over five years (2012–2016) to implement comprehensive projects to reduce private car travel and to encourage more sustainable modes of transport such as walking, cycling, public transport and

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car-sharing. These towns were to be demonstration projects serving as a template for the expansion of the 'Smarter Travel Area' concept across the country.

Systematic reviews of interventions to increase population levels of active transport have been unable to identify definitive strategy components to increase walking (Heath et al., 2012; Ogilvie et al., 2007) and cycling for transport (Heath et al., 2012; NICE, 2012; Yang et al., 2010). These studies are in agreement that the quality of the available studies in the area is poor, intervention effects are small (particularly for studies of individual components) and little is known about longer-term effectiveness. Reviews that included uncontrolled and non-peer reviewed studies found it equally difficult to isolate the impact of specific active travel measures (de Nazelle et al., 2011; Dill et al., 2013; Forsyth and Krizek, 2010; Pucher et al., 2010). Although there is a paucity of evidence on specific measures, the reviews of cycling specific studies all agree that cities and towns that have comprehensive and co-ordinated packages of cycling-related infrastructure, programmes and policies have seen the most pronounced increases in levels of cycling. Typically the countries with the highest levels of active transport (e.g. Netherlands, Denmark and Germany) invest heavily in pro-cycling policies. However, they also counterbalance these measures with policies that make driving more expensive and less convenient, to create a more synergistic intervention effect (Pucher and Buehler, 2008). Buehler et al. (2016) examined the policies that were implemented across five major European cities that experienced significant decreases in car use over the last 25 years. While the mix of cycling and public transport policies was different in each city, they each implemented similar car restrictive policies. Of these, parking management was deemed to be the most influential. This counterbalanced approach to creating a modal shift to active transport is less evident in car dependent countries like Ireland.

The implementation of car restrictive policies in urban centres is a contentious issue in traffic management. In particular there is a belief that car drivers are more valuable to retail trade than pedestrians and cyclists (Marsden, 2006; Rowe, 2013). Previous research has shown how the business community have the potential to shape the implementation of active transport policy in urban centres (Moutou and Mulley, 2012). Displays of power from the business community to either protect or advance their interests have resulted in both the abandonment and acceleration of active transport measures depending on the relationship between stakeholders. The available literature, though limited and mostly restricted to larger cities, would suggest that the fears of the business community are unfounded. On the contrary, there is an argument that pedestrians and cyclists are more lucrative to traders than car drivers (Kåstrup, 2013; Lee and March, 2010; O'Connor et al., 2011). Parking restraint policies (Koetse and Rietveld, 2008; Leitman, 2013; Mingardo and van Meerkerk, 2012), improvements to the cycling and pedestrian infrastructure (Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, 2007; Lawlor, 2013; Rowe, 2013) and full pedestrianization (Banister, 2009; Hass-klaui, 1993; Parkhurst, 2008) have all been shown to have no long-term negative impact on retail trade and a positive impact in many cases. Nonetheless they remain the least politically feasible active transport measures to implement.

### 1.1. The local context of the research

In 2012, two towns in the South-East of Ireland (referred to here as town 1 and town 2) received funding to implement sustainable transport demonstration projects. Town 1 was designated as an 'Active Travel Town' and received €415,000 for the construction of a pedestrian bridge and other related active transport measures in the town. It is a medieval city, is

predominantly flat and has a population of approximately 25,000 people and a population density of 1825 per km<sup>2</sup>. It is a reasonably compact city and frequently referred to as the '10 minute city' with many destinations easily accessible by foot or by bike. Town 2 was designated as a 'Smarter Travel Area' and received €7.2 million for the creation of a comprehensive five year demonstration project which included the conversion of an old railway track into a separated walking and cycling path in the outer environs of the town. It is a predominantly flat and compact coastal town. The population of the town is 12,300 and the population density is 1116 per km<sup>2</sup>. The environmental conditions for active travel may have been more favourable in town 1.

Both towns predominantly focused on introducing improvements to the pedestrian and cycling infrastructure on the radial routes around the perimeter of the town centres. However, efforts to introduce car restrictive policies in the town centres were mixed. In town 1, a one-way system was introduced on a trial basis on the main retail strip in 2010 and it was this measure which proved to be the catalyst for local trader opposition to 'Smarter Travel' and pedestrianization. City centre traders lobbied councillors for the abandonment of the trial after only two days, citing anecdotal evidence of reduced footfall and retail trade. The mounting political pressure and negative media attention forced the reversal of the one-way system one week after it commenced. In town 2, an extensive pre-consultation phase was launched in 2013 to develop a proposal to redevelop four areas of the town centre. The town square is the commercial and retail heart of the town and was one of these areas proposed for redevelopment. The final proposal for the square that was brought to statutory consultation was met with strong resistance from the local retail traders in the square. The proposal included a range of measures to improve the walkability of the area, one of which included the removal of 18 car parking places (17% reduction). The resistance from traders manifested itself in the creation of a petition to abolish the proposal, lobbying of councillors, customer surveys, a social media campaign and coverage in the local and national media. The result of this campaign was a compromise whereby the final number of car parking spaces to be removed was 10.

These issues expressed in the two intervention towns sets the context for the barriers posed by retail traders, and the potential influence of that in reducing the capacity of the active travel interventions to be implemented as planned. This examination of the implementation process of active transport interventions is important in the context of scaling up demonstration projects in Ireland and in other car dependent countries. Specifically, the study sought to examine the factors that precluded the introduction of car restrictive policies in both urban centres. Lessons are also presented on how to moderate the dissonance between retail traders and local authorities when introducing active travel measures.

## 2. Materials and methods

### 2.1. Research design

This study consisted of a series of qualitative semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders in both intervention towns. The interviews were conducted at two time points. The first series of interviews (baseline) were conducted in December 2011 before the allocation of 'Smarter Travel' funding to either town. The second series of interviews were conducted in November and December 2013 (follow-up) during the implementation of the 'Smarter Travel' programme. The interviews examined stakeholders' experiences of the implementation process. These conversations

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