



## Using the land-use planning process to secure travel plans: an assessment of progress in England to date

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### ABSTRACT

A travel plan is a package of measures implemented by an organisation to encourage people who travel to/from that organisation to do so by means other than driving alone by private car. This paper advances two principal arguments: firstly, that the planning system and maximum parking standards as part of it are the main factors leading to travel plan development in England today; and, secondly, that the difficulties of using the planning system in this way means that there is a risk that many of these travel plans are unlikely to have a great deal of influence on travel patterns, making it more unlikely that they will achieve the predicted impact on travel behaviour change, as contained in the important study and report “Smarter Choices” (Department for Transport, 2004).

This paper presents results from a survey of planning and transport authorities in England, which obtained a 62% response rate from the 139 authorities contacted. It also uses the results of 18 interviews with local authority and Highways Agency staff involved in securing travel plans through the planning process. The survey found that the planning process (as opposed to voluntary efforts) is indeed the main means by which travel plans are now secured. In addition, maximum parking standards were shown to have a major influence on travel plan formation for organisations going through the planning process. There are however reasons to doubt that all of the travel plans secured through the planning process are effective. This is because:

- Many local authorities use only planning conditions and not the more flexible (but complex) obligations which would allow more complex travel plans to be secured.
- There is a lack of monitoring of travel plans in many authorities.
- There is evidence that in many authority areas there are travel plans in breach of legal agreements, but these breaches are not enforced, reportedly due to a lack of monitoring, resources, and other organisational issues.

The paper discusses the reasons for these findings and also makes a number of suggestions as to how the planning system could be improved as a means of securing travel plans.

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### 1. Introduction

A travel plan is a package of measures implemented by an organisation to encourage people who travel to/from that organisation to do so by means other than driving alone by private car. In North America they are known as trip reduction plans and in other countries in Europe mobility plans. From a situation where they were unknown in the UK 15 years ago, travel plans have become an

important part of UK and especially English transport policy statements, and a key part of the wider “Smarter Choices” agenda (Department for Transport, 2004), which argued that so-called “soft” – i.e. non-infrastructure – measures have significant potential to solve the country’s transport problems and meet CO<sub>2</sub> reduction targets. Travel plans can be implemented voluntarily; they may be implemented by a group of organisations when a management decision is taken that travel management is a group policy (e.g. in the English NHS); and, in the UK, it is also possible to use the planning system to encourage and/or require that developers and occupiers of new and expanded buildings develop travel plans as part of the land-use planning process. This latter option of

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course applies only to developments that need planning permission from the local planning authority. There are a number of academic articles that provide an analysis of travel plans – their motivations, the extent to which they have been adopted, their location within organisations and their impacts (see for example Coleman, 2000; Rye, 2002; Ison and Rye, 2003; Enoch, 2008; Roby, 2010). However, this literature is largely silent on the role of the land-use planning system as a mechanism for securing and encouraging the uptake of travel plans, and that is why this topic is the central focus of this paper. The reader interested in these other aspects of travel planning is referred to the literature listed above.

This paper advances two principal arguments: firstly, that the planning system and maximum parking standards as part of it are the main factors leading to travel plan development in the UK today; and, secondly, that the difficulties of using the planning system in this way means that there is a risk that many of these travel plans are unlikely to have a great deal of influence on travel patterns, thus making the full achievement of the predicted overall impacts on travel behaviour change, as contained in the *Department for Transport's 2004* report “Smarter Choices” more unlikely.

The paper is structured as follows. Firstly, primarily for the benefit of international readers, the principles of the UK land-use planning system are briefly summarised. This is followed by an explanation of central government guidance on how travel plans should be encouraged as part of the land-use planning system. The predictions of travel plan impacts contained in *Department for Transport (2004)* are then presented, and related to the results of a survey of local authorities and face-to-face interviews with local authority officers involved in travel planning, both carried out in 2006. These results reveal how the planning system in practice is working to bring about the implementation of more travel plans “on the ground”, and what problems are experienced in so doing. A case study of a travel plan that has been monitored is also presented, to show how the system can work, as well as results of an interview with a County Council that is active in pursuing travel plans through the planning process. From this, conclusions are drawn about the efficacy of the planning system as a means to realise travel plans, and recommendations made as to how the situation might be improved. Finally, some conclusions are also drawn as to the likelihood that the predictions in *Department for Transport (2004)* are reliable.

## 2. Travel plans in English transport policy

Surface transport policy is a matter that has been devolved to the administrations in each constituent country of the UK. In England, travel plans are perhaps higher up the transport policy agenda than in Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland, due to the consistently high priority placed on them by national government for the past 6–7 years. This is explained further, below.

In England, local authorities prepare 5-yearly Local Transport Plans (LTPs) which set out their objectives and policies for transport, and show how the objectives are to be achieved. These objectives must be shown to contribute towards national (English) government transport policy concerns, as well as towards solving more local problems. The plans are drawn up at local level but must take into account guidance issued by national government, and a relatively strict performance regime whereby a part of local authorities' transport funding is awarded by national government on the basis of the quality of their LTP, and is also linked to the progress that the local authority makes in implementing the plan. Progress is measured against targets, the subject of some 13 of which is prescribed by national government; one of these targets relates to travel plan implementation (the number of organisations in the area with a travel plan in place). Thus there is a financial incen-

tive for local authorities to encourage and report travel plan activity.

## 3. Principles of the UK land-use planning system

The planning system in the UK is based on written land-use plans, but these are not prescriptive: it is possible (although unlikely) that a development may go ahead that is in conflict with local and regional plans, if there are other over-riding factors in its favour. Transport is only one of the factors that is taken into account when making a planning decision.

The majority of developments in the UK are not promoted by the local authority but by a private sector developer or another arm of government (e.g. the health service building a hospital). Local authority land holdings are also much reduced in recent years. Therefore the public objectives set out in planning policy are mediated and shaped by the interests of other organisations that actually develop land.

There are three levels of government active in planning in the UK: elected national government, appointed regional government, and elected local government. In some areas local government is further subdivided into County Councils, which have a transport role, and District Councils, which carry out local planning, including the granting of planning permission for new development. In other areas, these two functions are combined into one local authority.

National government produces legislation governing the operation of the land-use planning system and guidance to regional and local authorities on how they should both set planning policy (e.g. how plans should be drawn up) and the factors that they should take into account when making planning decisions for particular developments. National government also has the power to “call-in” specific development decisions where it feels that it has a particular interest in the case and/or where it believes that the local authority has not taken into account its own, or regional or national, planning policy in reaching its decision to grant or refuse development. Therefore, national government in the UK has a significant influence over local planning decisions that is absent in many other countries.

Each region of England is required to produce a Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) which sets out the “broad development strategy for the region for a 15–20 year period”.<sup>2</sup> This statutory document outlines the government's transport and planning policy which then together provide part of the framework for determining planning applications in the region.

Local Government organisations are required to produce their own local policy that reflects national and regional policy and guidance. The Unitary and District Councils must produce Local Development Frameworks (LDFs) that reflect the policies outlined in the RSS as well as their own local priorities and objectives. This provides a key part of the framework for planning decisions on individual developments.

## 4. Travel plans within the land-use planning system

Travel plan and sustainable travel policies that encourage more sustainable patterns of travel are a relatively recent feature of transport and land use-planning policies. Their origin was in the draft Planning Policy Guidance Note 13 (PPG13) published in 1994 (*DoT/DoE, 1994*). PPG 13 guided local planning authorities to produce policies that would encourage a reduction in the amount of car travel.

The Government White Paper “A New Deal for Transport Better for Everyone” published in 1998 (*DETR, 1998*) gave significant sup-

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.planningportal.gov.uk> accessed 3 April 2010.

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