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Policies for promoting walking and cycling in England: A view from the street

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ABSTRACT

Transport policies to increase active and sustainable travel in Britain have focused mainly on persuading people of the health benefits of walking and cycling for short trips, and have assumed that if people can be persuaded that more active travel has personal benefits then behavioural change will follow. Research reported in this paper, based mainly on detailed qualitative research in four English towns, argues that the complexities and contingencies that most people encounter in everyday life often make such behavioural change difficult. Attention is focused on three sets of factors: perceptions of risk; constraints created by family and household responsibilities; and perceptions of normality. It is suggested that unless such factors are tackled directly then policies to increase levels of walking and cycling will have limited success. In particular, it is argued that there needs to be a much more integrated approach to transport policy that combines interventions to make walking and (especially) cycling as risk-free as possible with restrictions on car use and attitudinal shifts in the ways in which motorists view other road users. Such policies also need to be linked to wider social and economic change which, in combination, creates an environment in which walking or cycling for short trips in urban areas is perceived as the logical and normal means of travel and using the car is viewed as exceptional.

1. Introduction

There has been substantial recent emphasis on the promotion of active travel in the UK, with a series of reports from government and other bodies making the case for people to walk or cycle for short journeys (Department for Transport (DfT) and Department of Health (DoH), 2010; DfT, 2010; www.travelactively.org.uk). Arguments for increased levels of walking and cycling have focused especially on the perceived health benefits of active travel as part of a strategy to reduce levels of obesity in the UK (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE), 2006; Ogilvie et al., 2007). The arguments in favour of walking and cycling have thus been constructed more in terms of personal gains in health, and potential reduction of pressure on health services, rather than as a case for walking and cycling as sensible travel options in their own right. Actions to promote walking and cycling have focused mainly on making this form of travel easy and attractive through the development of new infrastructure and the provision of cycle training, especially for children. This approach has been exemplified by the past work of Cycling England, the establishment of the Cycling Cities and Towns programmes, and the Sustrans Connect 2 initiative (www.dft.gov.uk/topics/sustainable/cycling; DfT, 2011a; www.sustrans.org.uk/what-we-do/connect2). Underlying all these activities is an assumption—often implicit—that if walking and (especially) cycling are made sufficiently easy and attractive then people will automatically shift short journeys from the car to more active modes and that they can be 'nudged' into travel behaviour that is better for them and for the environment (Thaler and Sunstein, 2009; John, 2011).

However, there is increasing evidence that such approaches are rarely effective because they fail to take into account the complex sets of factors that prevent people adopting behavioural change. In particular, it can be argued that even when people believe that a different set of behaviour is appropriate—such as walking or cycling rather than using the car, they rarely put these beliefs into action because of other constraints on their behaviour (Shove, 2010; House of Lords Science and Technology Select Committee, 2011). Without more active interventions to not only make walking and cycling easier and attractive but also to make the alternative of car use harder and less acceptable, it is unlikely that significant modal shifts

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will be achieved. However, recent policies have been reluctant to adopt more interventionist approaches relying instead on persuasion and promotion of active travel mainly on health grounds. While in part such reluctance to intervene may be political—an unwillingness to promote policies that would be unpopular with some parts of the electorate at least—it is argued that it also stems from a failure to appreciate fully the existing constraints that make it hard for people to change travel modes (Mackett, 2001, 2003; Jarvis, 2003; Alfonzo, 2005; Anable, 2005). Research reported in this paper focuses on the views of a wide cross-section of travellers about their everyday travel for short trips in urban areas, and highlights the complex reasons why people do not regularly walk or cycle even when they are otherwise well disposed towards this form of transport. Policy implications that follow from these research findings are then outlined. The paper adds both evidence and specific policy recommendations to existing academic discussion of sustainable urban transport (for overviews see Banister, 2005, 2007; Cox, 2010).

It is notable that where policies have been developed that are more interventionist there has also been the most obvious change in levels of walking and cycling. This is most clearly the case in parts of central London where the introduction of congestion charging in 2003 (Richardson, 2004; Leape, 2006) together with an existing urban infrastructure that militates against car use and, by the standards of most British towns, a good public transport system has led to a reduction in car use and an increase in levels of walking and cycling for short journeys (Transport for London (TfL), 2008). This has been reinforced by investment in cycle lanes (for instance in the London Borough of Camden: www.camden.gov.uk/ccm/navigation/transport-and-streets/cycling-in-camden), the introduction of a cycle hire scheme (www.tfl.gov.uk/roadusers/cycling/14808.aspx), and the promotion of cycling for utility travel both by the Mayor of London (TfL, 2010a) and by a number of active campaign groups including the London Cycling Campaign, Cycle Training UK, the CTC, Sustrans and Living Streets. Congestion charging has so far been largely rejected outside of London (the only exception being a small scheme in Durham) and the most widely adopted interventionist measure that could potentially make urban streets both safer and more attractive for cyclists and pedestrians is the introduction of 20 mph zones in residential streets. These are gradually being introduced in many parts of the country (www.slower-speeds.org.uk/20s-plenty).

However, valuable as such schemes are, it can be suggested that their impact is likely to be limited unless more attention is paid to the views and concerns of all travellers. The increase in cycling in London remains concentrated in a relatively narrow socio-economic and demographic band, and is focused mainly on the central city (TfL, 2010b, 2010c). Outside of this area cycling rates remain low and Whitelegg (2011) has recently argued that much more aggressive measures to restrict car use in London are necessary if more widespread adoption of non-car travel is to be achieved. While high profile campaigns by existing and committed cyclists and cycle organisations have clearly had some impact, and are an important part of the total picture, it can be argued that the attention paid to the views of this committed minority has deflected attention from the experiences of everyday travellers who currently do not cycle and who rarely walk. Research reported in this paper focuses on a much wider range of views to suggest a more radical set of interventions that may be necessary to achieve any substantial change in the ways in which most people travel in urban areas.

2. Methods

Data reported in this paper are drawn from a large EPSRC-funded project that used multiple methods to examine the experience of walking and cycling in four case study towns in England. In summary, the project aimed to explore ways in which walking and cycling are incorporated into the everyday routines and practices of households and individuals, to assess how decisions about everyday travel (especially with regard to walking and cycling) are constructed, and to examine the ways in which walking and cycling are viewed by the travelling public. Our aim was to study a wide range of people, including those who rarely or never walk or cycle, and to focus on short trips in urban areas that could reasonably be undertaken on foot or by bike. Four case study towns were identified: Leeds, Leicester, Worcester and Lancaster. These were selected to represent a cross-section of English urban areas outside London, with varied social characteristics, and each with different levels of existing intervention to promote walking and cycling. Four principal methods were employed: a postal questionnaire survey sent to 15,000 homes examining experiences of and attitudes towards walking and cycling; spatial analysis of the connectivity of all usable routes and of land uses in the four case study towns; 80 interviews with households and individuals both in the home and on the move whilst walking and cycling on commonly-used routes in the urban areas; and 20 household ethnographies designed to probe in more detail the ways in which everyday travel was embedded in household routines. This paper draws principally on the latter two methods (with more details given briefly below). Further information about all the research methods used can be found in Pooley et al. (2011).

Interviewees were selected from questionnaire respondents to represent a cross-section of the population in the four study towns. 40 interviews were undertaken in households, exploring attitudes to walking and cycling and the reasons why people chose particular forms of everyday travel, and 40 interviews were undertaken as 'go-alongs' or mobile interviews while walking or cycling (Ricketts et al., 2008; Carpanio, 2009). These focused on the experience of travelling through the urban area and recorded the respondents' responses to the everyday situations they encountered whilst walking or cycling. Interviews were divided equally between the four study areas and half of the mobile interviews were undertaken on foot and half whilst cycling. Mobile interviews can pose particular problems as it is not always easy to carry on and record a conversation whilst travelling (Fincham et al., 2009). Cycling in heavy traffic posed especial difficulties and the interviews were supplemented with additional material both before and after the journey.

The ethnographic study was designed to allow researchers to embed themselves as closely as possible in participating households and to observe and record everyday travel decisions at close quarters (Silverstone, 1991). Households were selected by a variety of means: initially from questionnaire responses but also by snowballing and word of mouth in the field. In each city one locality was selected for detailed study so that all households included in the ethnographic study encountered a similar urban structure. In total five households were researched in each town and the intention was to use a range of methods to collect data. These included observations, interviews (both household and while travelling), travel diaries, mapping exercises, mobility inventories and community participation. On average three months were spent collecting data intensively from households in each area. In practice the precise methods used varied substantially from area to area and had to be adapted in the field to suit local circumstances. For instance, whereas in largely middle class areas most respondents understood the purpose of the research and were happy to welcome researchers into their homes for sustained periods, in more working class and/or culturally diverse districts the research was sometimes met with a mixture of suspicion and non-comprehension, and access to the homes of respondents was much more limited. None-the-less we did collect broadly comparable data from all areas and in total the interviews and ethnographies have