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## Shaping the Future: case studies in UK accessibility planning

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### Abstract

There has been an extensive academic debate about the theory of accessibility planning but far less discussion of the practice. This paper illustrates how accessibility planning has succeeded in delivering more sustainable solutions yet failed to change mainstream transport delivery, and what this means for future transport policy directions in the UK.

The best way to predict the future is to shape it. Transport planning has a poor track record in predicting travel demand, so accessibility planning emerged in the 1990s as a promising approach to help shape travel demand. It was hoped that with a focus on accessibility a more optimal balance between supply and demand in transport could be achieved, consistent with sustainability. Since then there has been a steady expansion in the number of businesses and other employers planning access for their staff and in local authorities improving access to local services and facilities. However after 20 years, mainstream accessibility plans cover only a small minority of people and organizations. The focus of delivery remains social groups who face particular problems, such as personal mobility restrictions. Responding to problems is only one motivation for action and successful approaches to widen the coverage of accessibility planning have relied on audits, funding, and legislative requirements. The paper presents a typology projects to explain the scope and limits of current UK accessibility planning. It identifies how projects can change land use plans, invest in new safe routes to shops, devise new ticketing and payment approaches for passenger transport, and develop new solutions for sharing of cars, taxis and cycles to make transport more available to more people. The experiences from practice show that there are important obstacles to cross sector working and evidence led planning. The transport sector continues to be reluctant to lead complex cross sector programmes, and there is an evolving policy debate about leadership of transport, accessibility planning and sustainable development. The future of accessibility planning is secured by the essential needs of people to reach opportunities, goods and services, but the organization of delivery needs new funding and focus.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper argues that accessibility planning is the most practical way yet devised to shape the future of sustainable transport. This is not a perspective that is shared by everyone in transport, or at least not using the same language and terminology, so the paper looks at alternative perspectives on how to shape the future and the factors which affect their success.

The paper starts by looking at the problems which accessibility planning seeks to solve, and the different approaches that might be adopted to solve them. It then draws from case study evidence demonstrating how accessibility planning has tackled these problems. Finally the evolving policy debate is reviewed showing pathways towards wider delivery of accessibility planning.

The paper does not discuss accessibility planning processes in detail as these are described extensively elsewhere (e.g. DfT 2005, Halden 2009). However it is worth restating that accessibility planning is defined as a flexible approach with two key elements: checking that accessibility needs are being met, and organizing action to tackle gaps in access.

## 2. Solving accessibility problems

Analysis of change in accessibility in developed economies generally shows that accessibility is falling for many people (SEU 2003, Koopmansa 2013). Transport authorities may argue that they have invested to make access less bad than it otherwise might have been. However if accessibility is falling, the transport solutions that claim vaguely specified accessibility benefits, yet which do not appear to deliver clearly defined accessibility improvements, must be questioned.

Accessibility planning is distinguished from transport planning by making accessibility goals explicit delivery outcomes through a managed cross sector delivery approach. There are three drivers of accessibility change: evolving land uses, developing capabilities of people and the changing connections between people and places. When an education authority refers to its access plan its focus is on access to the educational curriculum, and health authorities are focused on ensuring the availability of healthcare. This is common across most destination provision; transport issues are not completely ignored, but they are not given detailed consideration. The destination providers perceive transport authorities to be more concerned with transport.

In a similar way, transport authorities have viewed their primary responsibilities as relating to the transport system and have not always planned the interaction between transport, people and places explicitly. The need for accessibility planning in the UK was therefore defined by a requirement to focus more clearly on the needs of people, to define the terms of engagement for joint working between transport and other sectors (SEU 2003).

In practice transport providers are often frustrated when the destination providers and the people make organizational and personal choices which reduce accessibility for society. Relocating a hospital to an out of town location may save the health authority money by building on low cost land but it can also make the provision of improved access unaffordable for a transport authority. The planning of destination locations, and supporting the capabilities of people to access these locations, are at least as important factors affecting accessibility as the planning of transport and other connections.

Accessibility planning sought to help transport authorities assert their role and leadership in delivering accessibility improvements (SEU 2003). Rather than responding to travel demand derived from the decisions of others, accessibility planning has sought to enable the transport sector to lead the delivery of more sustainable transport to shape a better future (DfT 2005).

Enabling leaders to shape the future does not ensure that all accessibility problems will be solved. However it has led to a growing evidence base about how to deliver more people focused solutions through cross-sector working as discussed below.

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