

PARK AND RIDE – EXPLODING THE MYTH

Britain is a small island with too many cars. From the 1940s through to the 1990s successive governments copied America's bigger, wider roads; out-of-town stores and complex cloverleaf junctions.

The extra space has not generally led to faster journeys. Instead, more Britons have been encouraged to drive, even for trips of less than a mile. New roads tempted more people to use the car. Tailbacks and gridlock resulted.

One solution put forward is park and ride, a 1960s idea which allows motorists to leave their cars on the edge of town and catch a bus to the centre. Its key aims are to reduce traffic or stabilise traffic growth, and to support town centre retail and business. But is it efficient and does it provide value for money?

Park and ride should work. Logic dictates that if you take cars out of a traffic system, then numbers will fall. Equally, shoppers say they like fast journeys to the town centre, leading traders to hope for increased custom.

Experience, however, highlights flaws in this thinking. In towns that have park and ride schemes, congestion has been allowed to creep up, often over the levels before the park and ride was introduced. Transport planners, too, have been known to fund their schemes by adding out-of-town retail stores at park and ride bus stations, further undermining town centres' viability.

The capital and revenue costs - creating a car park and express bus routes, and running a 10-minute bus service for at least 14 hours a day - have to be taken into account. Virtually no park and ride operation in the UK is in profit, with the possible exception of Oxford. All the others operate with large subsidies from taxes.

What is the benefit? A 300-space park and ride operating at full capacity will take up to 900 cars from town roads daily. Unfortunately that can be a tiny percentage of the number of cars on a particular corridor: very often, park and ride does not pass the value test.

If drivers who use park and ride are to be believed, it will achieve its aims. However, this must be put into perspective. How many would come to town anyway? What is the effect of park and ride on the sustainability of neighbouring small towns: could it increase centralisation?

And who is park and ride aimed at? The roads are at their most congested at morning and evening peak times. However, if a scheme is aimed at car commuters, then this is not economical: the council has to maintain buses throughout the day for all users; if a scheme is aimed at shoppers and tourists, then the question must be "why?" - the roads outside peak hours are usually free-running.

Park and ride can also have a bad effect on current rural and urban bus services. Most park and rides have simplified and cheaper fares together with faster, cleaner and more frequent buses. The viability of ordinary services can be reduced if people choose to drive, either using their car instead of the bus or taking friends who would otherwise have caught a bus by themselves. There have even been cases of people driving out of town to return on a park and ride bus!

Park and ride can be a transport solution, but not in isolation. The two key aims of park and ride should be tested throughout the planning process, and any authority considering a scheme should look at whether the money can be better spent on other transport issues, for instance, providing free rail and ride buses or discounts for shoppers with valid bus and train tickets.

If park and ride goes ahead it should be part of a wider strategy, to include a congestion charge, reduced town centre parking or limited town centre access. Any park and ride bus priorities should be capable of being shared with service buses. Authorities may also like to consider forcing out-of-town retail parks to charge for parking and, in the longer term, creating of traditional-style "mini town centres" to reduce the need to travel.

Thorough studies should be made of levels of car use, bus use, walking and cycling before the scheme begins to judge the effect of park and ride.

In conclusion, however, it has to be stressed that park and ride is concerned with increasing mobility (the desire to travel) over accessibility (the ease of using local services). Councils should test park and ride against their priorities, and act accordingly.

© William Bramhill, william@bramhill.net, June 2010