

# Travel patterns in 'smart' towns show potential for traffic reduction

Residents in Darlington, Peterborough and Worcester have a realistic alternative for about 40-50% of their local car trips, according to recent research. With DfT funding, these towns are now introducing extensive packages of 'soft' measures to encourage people to choose more sustainable travel options. **Sally Cairns** reports

In April last year Darlington, Peterborough and Worcester were named as winners of the DfT's 'sustainable travel towns' competition. Jointly, they were allocated £10m over five years, to become showcases of what can be achieved by implementing a range of 'softer' transport policies. Last month the towns reported on their first year of work at a conference held in Darlington. This marked the beginning of a sequence of annual conferences to report progress.

The sustainable travel towns initiative follows on from recent DfT-commissioned research on 'Smarter Choices'. This study examined the likely impacts of implementing a range of 'soft' measures such as workplace and school travel plans, information and marketing campaigns, car clubs and car sharing schemes and increased use of tele-working. It concluded that such measures have the potential to cut urban traffic by 14% overall and up to 21% in the peak period. Part of the rationale for the sustainable travel towns project is to establish whether these results can be achieved in practice.

Speaking at the conference, Patricia Hayes, head of sustainable travel at the DfT, said that interest in the initiative had significantly exceeded their expectations. Over 50 places competed to be chosen as the demonstration towns. In return for the funding for 'smarter choice' measures, participating local

authorities were required to promise a contribution to the costs of the project, to implement an overarching strategy for their town and to put in place high quality infrastructure to enable 'quick, safe and pleasant travel by all modes'.

In Darlington, Peterborough and Worcester the initial phase of work has included an extensive benchmarking study, assessing both existing travel patterns and the potential for change. Overall, 12,855 people were surveyed. Reporting the results, Werner Brög of consultant Socialdata highlighted that, in some ways, the towns are very similar. In all three, 41-45% of trips are made as a car driver and about two-thirds are made by car overall. Similarly, 22-25% of trips are made on foot. All three towns are relatively self-contained, with residents making more than three-quarters of all journeys within their town. Notably, in all three, at least 85% of residents would favour a local transport strategy that gave preferential treatment to walking, cycling and public transport, "even if this were to disadvantage private cars".

## Potential to change

All three are also similar, in that a significant proportion of car journeys are very short. However, the proportions vary. For example, the percentage of car trips under 3km within each town is 43% in Darlington, 38% in Worcester and 27% in Peterborough.



Buses in Peterborough have been branded with the TRAVELCHOICE logo. The side of the bus also features the orange identifier for public transport

Peterborough City Council

Perhaps partly because of this, the survey work also revealed significant differences in the potential for change. In a smaller, in-depth survey, 1,209 respondents were asked why they made specific journeys by car. For each trip, researchers then analysed whether realistic alternatives were available (by walking, cycling or public transport), taking account of factors such as acceptable walking distances, comparable bus times and luggage or disability constraints. In Darlington, at least one viable alternative was found for 56% of car trips within the town, compared with 46% in Worcester and 39% in Peterborough.

Taken together, these results imply that there should be substantial potential to achieve behavioural change in all three locations using 'soft' measures but the degree of change achieved could be significantly different.

Achieving change will also depend on the strategies that the towns adopt. Already it is clear that their approaches share similarities but, also, important differences. All three now have staff dedicated to introducing workplace and school travel plans. However, in Darlington, these are relatively recent appointees, whilst Worcester has a relatively established travel planning programme, having already worked with about half its schools. All three towns will be undertaking extensive personalised travel planning (see panel left).

All three are also undertaking considerable marketing activity, albeit with differing emphases. Darlington has initially developed some relatively general advertising, as part of trying to generate a 'mood for change' (see

## Providing the personal travel planning touch

All three sustainable travel towns are planning to undertake extensive personalised travel planning. Their initiatives will constitute some of the most extensive work of this kind in the UK.

Personalised travel planning (also known, for example, as 'Individualised Marketing', 'TravelSmart', 'Travel Blending' or 'Living Change'), involves giving people information, advice and other incentives to use more sustainable travel options that are specific to their circumstances. For example, residents might be offered a timetable about buses visiting their nearest bus stop, free 'taster' tickets enabling them to try out the services, maps of local walking, cycling or shopping opportunities, individ-

ual advice on how they could optimise their travel, etc. Many proponents also argue that a key aspect of successful work is enabling participants to request what they want to receive (rather than distributing materials to all).

Work of this nature has been taking place for a number of years, with high profile success in Australia. In the UK, the charity Sustrans generated interest in the topic by undertaking small-scale projects in Gloucester and Frome in 2001. These led on to Transport for London's Travel Options work (involving 4,000 households), the Scottish Executive's Stepchange initiative (involving 4,000 households) and a DfT programme of 14 pilot projects throughout the UK, (includ-

ing larger projects focused on 10,000 residents in Gloucester and 18,000 employees in Oldham). From the five pilot projects that they were involved in, Sustrans has reported consistent reductions in car driver trips of 10-12% and a full evaluation of the programme is expected from the DfT soon.

Meanwhile, the sustainable travel towns are planning work on a significantly larger scale. Darlington is preparing to engage all 98,000 of its residents, Peterborough is aiming to target about 70,000 people and Worcester is focusing on higher car ownership areas representing about 60% of the city (56,000 people). In all three areas, contracts are currently being let and work will commence shortly.

panel right). In comparison, Peterborough has developed a specific brand for each mode, displaying consistent colours and images in a range of locations, including use of cinema adverts, on-street posters, letter-heads and business cards for the council's environment services and the city's buses. It is notable that none of the towns are using TravelWise branding but have, instead, developed town-specific logos, images and slogans: 'Darlington: a town on the move'; 'Your TRAVELCHOICE in Peterborough. Your city, your move!'; 'Worcester: on the move in town'; (although Worcester will also be supporting their corporate work with the TravelWise branding). This raises questions as to whether localised transport marketing is now considered to be more powerful than a generic national approach.

Other 'smarter choice' initiatives are also under consideration. For example, both Darlington and Peterborough are involved in car sharing schemes and all three towns are considering introducing car clubs. All three have also involved a wide range of stakeholders, including the commercial and health sectors, as part of taking the work forward.

### 'Harder' measures

At the same time, all three towns have parallel programmes of 'harder' measures, aimed at reinforcing the softer work that takes place. For example, Emilie van de Graaff, passenger transport development manager at Worcestershire County Council, explained that Worcester's sustainable travel work is seen as being closely linked with a strategy to develop park-and-ride around the town, in an effort to create a situation where no-one can say that they need to drive in. She also outlined plans for harmonising bus fares and parking charges, to ensure that public transport would always be the cheaper option.

Meanwhile, the three towns are introducing their policies in very different contexts. For example, Worcester is a non-unitary authority, and the relationship between the city and county council has needed clarification (as the money has been allocated to the county but is being spent on the city). Peterborough is scheduled for considerable growth, since it falls within the London-Stansted-Cambridge Growth Area, such that sustainable travel considerations will need inclusion in substantial areas of new housing. In contrast, Darlington falls within a relatively deprived region and ensuring that traffic restraint is not sacrificed in order to attract business will be a challenge. Richard Alty, cabinet member for highways and transportation and assistant director for development and regeneration at Darlington Borough Council, reported that the integration of planning, economic and transport functions within Darlington should help to ensure consistency of approach. For all three towns, conference delegates also highlighted the need for a positive working relationship with the local media and the importance of economic monitoring, to enable the impacts of any traffic changes to be interpreted appropriately.

## Darlington: a town on the move

Darlington, the town identified in the recent survey work as having the greatest potential for change, began its work by extending half-price fares for under-16s to all bus services across the borough. Positive marketing has also been put in place, including radio adverts featuring music from a local band. "Get ready to change the habits of a lifetime," proclaims one voice-over, whilst others advise people to try walking, cycling or taking the bus.

Travel plan officers have been appointed to start working with local schools and businesses. A small grants scheme has been established for employers and free cycle training is offered to all schools. The consultancy Steer Davies Gleave has just been contracted to start the first of three phases of personalised travel planning, which will involve all residents. Living Streets (formerly the Pedestrian's Association) is in the process of completing community street audits in four areas of the town, aimed at producing recommendations about benches, litter bins, lighting, surfacing, crossing points, signing and maps. A series of cycle guides are also being developed. As part of leading by example, the council is proposing to subcontract its mail delivery system to 'Green-link', a cycle courier firm, and, within the region's car sharing site ([www.2plustravel.com](http://www.2plustravel.com)), a car-sharing

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Children in Darlington get the opportunity to try out a range of bikes as part of the town's travel awareness work

facility specifically for the council's employees has been set up and promoted. A number of awareness-raising events are planned for the summer, including participation in national campaigns, a two-day 'Darlington walking festival' and a series of organised bike rides.

Meanwhile, the sustainable travel town work coincides with a major pedestrianisa-

tion scheme being implemented in the town centre, which should provide substantial reinforcement for the softer initiatives taking place. Measures will include the exclusion of traffic from key central streets, major streetscape improvements incorporating public art work, better routes for pedestrians and cyclists, new bus shelters and greater bus priority.

As well as focusing on the experience of Darlington, Peterborough and Worcester, the conference also explored the opportunities for other towns to undertake their own programmes of softer measures. Funding was seen as a critical issue, in particular the need for revenue funding and the problems of obtaining this via the local transport plan

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process that provides capital funding only.

Lynn Sloman, one of the authors of the 'Smarter Choices' report, reported on new analysis, suggesting that an intensive 'Smarter Choices package' for a typical town could be expected to cost an average of £5 per resident per year in revenue funding. She argued that the new LTP guidance encourages local authorities to bid for money for 'smarter choice' measures, highlighting paragraph 70 in part 4, which states: "the Department would encourage authorities to consider how they might follow the lead of others in exploring how 'revenue-type' transport activity, aimed at maximising the benefits of particular infrastructure projects, could be funded from capital allocations".

Speaking subsequently, Geoff Gardner, travel awareness officer at North Yorkshire

County Council, noted that 1% of capital expenditure in its integrated transport programme is already allocated for travel awareness activities, on the basis that awareness-raising is needed to maximise the benefits of capital projects. Don Nutt, of consultant Steer Davies Gleave, argued that requesting LTP funding for 'smarter choice' measures could be justified as they should make a central contribution to achieving progress on the four shared-priority areas that authorities are directed to put at the heart of their next LTP, namely delivering accessibility, tackling congestion, better air quality and safer roads.

In summary, then, the recent survey work undertaken in Darlington, Peterborough and Worcester suggests that there is considerable potential for towns to achieve travel behavioural change and the initiatives being implemented offer an exciting opportunity to see if this change can be achieved in practice. At the same time, many other towns have the opportunity to emulate the sustainable travel towns, if softer measures are made a higher priority for funding. LTP allocations may be key to this.

Speaking at the conference, Patricia Hayes emphasised the importance of short-distance local journeys, highlighting, for example, that people make as many trips by bike as by train. Yet the recurrent complaint by many local authority officials is that DfT funding is still heavily skewed towards long-distance, heavy infrastructure solutions. If the sustainable travel towns achieve success, this may provide the catalyst for an entirely new focus to transport policy.