

VIEWPOINT

The facts are clear – life events change travel behaviour. Policy-makers please take note

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In his most recent column, Phil Goodwin noted a “widely accepted” proposition that “it is around the point of transition from one stage in the lifecycle to another, that people are most prone to reconsider whole patterns of lifestyle and behaviour and [are] therefore open to trying out different travel choices and routines” (*LTT* 24 Jul). Phil also previously suggested (in *LTT* 502 in 2008) that this is not self-evident, since assessing alternative transport options may not be the first priority when people are “distracted by much more weighty issues”. So, is there evidence now to support the proposition that people are more willing to change travel behaviour at the time of life events like moving home or changing job?

This has been the subject of a growing body of research since 2003 under the heading of ‘mobility biographies’ (originally termed by Martin Lanzendorf, now of the Goethe-University, Frankfurt). Our own work in this area, at the Centre for Transport & Society (UWE), includes the recently completed ‘Life transitions and travel behaviour’ project that we conducted with the University of Essex and the DfT, and which was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. It involved an examination of the relationship between life events and travel behaviour change using a large representative sample of the English population. The project was made possible following the release of the first two waves of data from the *Understanding Society* study (covering 2009/10 and 2010/11). Crucially, *Understanding Society* is surveying the same individuals (from a sample of 40,000 UK households) every year, making it possible to identify how and why the lives of people across the UK population are changing over time.

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firmed, beyond doubt, that a great deal of travel behaviour change does occur at the time of different life events. A brief summary of the highlights follows. An important first observation is that many people experience significant events in their lives each year. For example, 7% of adults move home, 6% change jobs and 3% have a child. Such events are particularly prominent for younger adults between 20 and 30 years of age. Simple cross tabulations further demonstrated that those people experiencing life events were overall about twice as likely to change car ownership and commute mode than those whose lives were stable.

A more detailed investigation of household car ownership revealed that changes to the number of cars available to households (from one year to the next) were most strongly influenced by familial lifecycle events such as partnership formation and dissolution, having children and gaining a driving licence (which is associated with reaching driving age). Moves into and out of employment were shown to trigger car acquisitions and relinquishments respectively, but to a lesser extent. We also observed that different life events were associated with different types of car ownership change. Most strikingly, the birth of a child was shown to trigger non-car owners to acquire the first car and two-car owners to get rid of the second car.

Our analysis showed that people were most likely to change commute mode (from one year to the next) when the distance to work is altered in conjunction with moving home or changing jobs. For example, switching to non-car commuting becomes nine times more likely as the distance to work drops below three miles, while switching to car commuting becomes 30 times more likely as the distance increases beyond two miles.

The study also confirmed that the influence of life events depends on urban form, the transport system and individual attitudes. For instance, switches to active commuting (walking and cycling) were found to be associated with moves to mixed land-use neighbourhoods, while switches away from car commuting were more likely in association with moves to neighbourhoods with better public transport access to employment. Individuals with pro-environmental attitudes were found to be more likely to switch away from car commuting and towards active commuting by the following year. This demonstrates that pro-environmental attitude precedes the behaviour change (strengthening evidence of

cause and effect) rather than attitudes simply adjusting to match behaviours.


So the answer to the question posed in the introduction is unequivocal. People are more likely to change travel behaviour at the time of a wide range of different life events. An important implication of this new evidence is that any policy concerned with individual behaviour change, that ignores life events, is missing a key element in the process of behaviour change.

The question then is, what types of policies can influence behavioural outcomes at the time of different life events?

In September 2014 we were invited to facilitate a workshop in Bristol with practitioners working within the West of England Local Sustainable Transport Fund programme. The West of England has been pioneering ‘smarter choices’ policies and actions to influence travel behaviours at the time of four different life transitions (moving to secondary school, starting university, moving home, and starting a new job).


After presenting our findings, many innovative policy interventions were suggested, including for example offering travel support to future parents (at antenatal classes), offering mobility options to those experiencing redundancy (who may be at risk of losing access to a car), and using council tax registrations as a means of identifying home moves and providing travel information to these households. There was also broad agreement that the evidence confirmed the importance of getting the policy ‘fundamentals’ right. This might mean, for example, in urban areas, delivering mixed use developments that are well served by public transport.


While the study has improved our understanding of the relationship between life events and travel behaviour change, a challenge remains to identify cost-effective policies that can intervene at the time of different life events. In this respect, there is currently very little evidence of the efficacy of such interventions – a topic that would certainly merit further research!

[To find out more about the Life transitions and travel behaviour study, visit www.travelbehaviour.com or contact Kiron.Chatterjee@uwe.ac.uk.] 


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In Passing


 *The Times* made a bit of a muddle of its reporting that the Office of Rail and Road has approved Great North Western Railways’ application to run open access rail services between Blackpool and London. The trains will initially terminate at Queen’s Park in north London because Network Rail says there isn’t the capacity to accommodate them in Euston, which is to be remodelled to accommodate High Speed 2. *The Times*, however, told readers: “In future Great North Western hopes to run services into Luton, but this depends on being granted slots by Network Rail, which is working on plans for the new HS2 line into that station.” Luton? Do the paper’s hacks still handwrite their stories and pass them to a typing pool?

 Defence chiefs have been making an impassioned plea for more funding in recent months, and the rudimentary state of the army’s logistics is revealed by the fol-

lowing tender notice issued by the Ministry of Defence: “Provision of maintenance, inspection and repair of railway locomotives, rolling stock, jacks and ass.” The notice was actually abbreviated at an unfortunate point – the “Ass” being “Associated Lifting Equipment”.

 Retired footballer Sol Campbell is hoping to win the fight to become the Conservative candidate in next May’s London mayoral election but he needs to try harder if he’s to be seen as the ‘man of the people’. Writing in the *Evening Standard* about the need for more electric cars in the capital, Campbell admitted that he is a recent convert to the technology. “I was unsure myself before I bought an electric car,” he says, before revealing in an aside that he’s the owner of a BMW i3. These retail for £25,000 – after, of course, multi-millionaire Campbell has benefitted from the Government’s £5,000 Plug-in car grant.

 Since Serco took over the Caledonian Sleeper franchise this spring, there has been a steady trickle of horror stories of trains breaking down in the middle of the night and taking hours to be rescued. So some travellers may have had a wry smile on reading the operator’s latest press release: “Award-winning acts from the Edinburgh Festival are taking centre stage on board the Serco Caledonian Sleeper, giving guests the chance to get up close and personal with comedians and variety acts.” It could be a long night.

 The DfT is holding a seminar on 23 September to mark the 50th anniversary of the National Travel Survey, looking at how personal travel has changed, how the NTS has informed policy, and future challenges. Tickets are available via <http://www.nts50.eventbrite.co.uk> But hurry – places are limited!