



The Future of Mobility

a Transport Knowledge Hub national workshop

Challenges and change ahead: public transport and the future of mobility

A number of significant economic and social trends are affecting transport needs and transport choices, and they are set to accelerate. As transport and mobility change in the years ahead, what should be the role of public transport in the future of mobility?

Last week the Transport Knowledge Hub invited key transport experts to take part in a national workshop to address this question. TKH executive director Claire Haigh explained it was the first of a series to inform the Hub's research programme, which this year would focus on how sustainable transport could support the government's Industrial Strategy Grand Challenges.

The recent DfT *Future of Mobility: Urban Strategy* document set out the principles underlying the government's approach, which included: mass transit must remain fundamental to an efficient transport system; innovation in mobility must help to reduce congestion through more efficient use of limited road space; and new mobility services must operate as part of an integrated transport system, with the benefits of innovation serving all segments of society.

Introducing the workshop, Gerard Whelan, KPMG director of corporate finance, government and infrastructure, said he wanted to hear "the extent to which we have choices in the future; how can these choices make transport more inclusive; and how quickly do we need to act in the short term?".

Five transport experts made short presentations as "witnesses", after which they answered questions first from a TKH panel and then from the floor.

The first witness, UCL professor of transport and sustainable development Peter Jones, said commuting and shopping trips by public transport were decreasing, but leisure use was increasing. But there were issues regarding Uber, micromobility and, in the longer term, autonomous vehicles. Rail, he said, was in a very strong position because of its speed and reliability; bus was the most threatened mode. But buses were increasing in quality and becoming more flexible, as demonstrated by Oxford Bus Company's PickMeUp.

Different parts of the country had different needs, but public transport could offer the attributes of moving large numbers of people and reducing emissions and improving air quality. The industry needed to adapt and listen to the voices of users and citizens to survive and prosper.

To a question from panellist and TKH chair Hilary Chipping over whether there was still a stigma associated with using public transport, he said there was a distinction between rail and bus, but

the image of bus improved as the product improved: guided bus and park and ride had a more positive perception.

Companies with growing patronage tended to have higher quality buses with features such as Wi-Fi.

Paul Campion, chief executive of TRL, said three issues needed to be dealt with: first, the potential of technology to deliver transport outcomes in different ways; second, decarbonisation, making transport less injurious to the environment; and third, geometry: the fact that towns, cities and rural roads could not be modified quickly, and that they limit the number of vehicles and people that can be moved in a given time.

He was confident that public transport could help address these questions, but it still suffered from a poor image. “How do we reconceptualise public transport as part of an overall system which helps reduce carbon and congestion?” he asked.

Asked by panellist Naomi Green about the balance between public and private funding and regulation, he said there was a tendency to think about market and regulation “as opposites”, whereas “markets are created by regulations that say ‘these are the areas where private enterprise can make money’. We should frame regulations to create the markets we want.” Regulation must be agile – “not Whitehall thinking up the perfect regulatory solution and releasing it, but having a number of options and seeing what fits best into [a region’s] political strategy.

Greg McClymont, National Infrastructure Commission assistant director for cities, said: “The greatest challenge for public transport is to allow people to live and work where they want.” Developments in automated cars would bring benefits, especially in urban areas, but “in the end they will still be cars”, with implications for congestion.

“The key questions for public transport are ultimately not technological but political,” he said. They were how to make the best use of road space – how much priority for buses and trams? – and this needed to be underpinned by an effective strategy to encourage people to use public transport, cycling and walking. In turn, this called for adequate funding from central government. “Having control over those funds will allow people to develop policies appropriate to their areas,” he said. “You can’t rely on technology to save the day.”

From the panel Tim Smith asked how much time there was to act. What was the NIC doing to highlight the urgency of the challenges?

Mr McClymont said it might not be possible to fix the problems in two or three years but local areas should be able to decide on priorities they wanted to invest in and they should be given the money from central government to allow them to do it. Local authorities should be more autonomous and not have to depend on making business cases to win central government funding for projects.

Go-Ahead managing director for bus development Martin Dean said the idea of mobility as a service (MaaS) was exercising a lot of people’s minds. The question for public transport operators was whether to be a leader or a contributor/follower. Should the public transport industry act as a contributor to a higher body that decides on price and presentation, or use its capability as a software provider/developer and provider of transport services to take a lead?

The downside of being a contributor was losing the link with the customer and control over marketing, after sales service and response when things go wrong. Conversely he asked whether the industry had the capability to develop the necessary software in a way that made a significant contribution. Experience showed IT took a lot of time and was expensive to develop, so that there was an argument that it was preferable to leave this to specialists, with transport operators becoming contributors, he said. At the moment the industry had a foot in both camps. From the panel Ian Wright said that MaaS had potential downsides, such as one dominant platform emerging, or a large number of different providers which were not integrated.

Mr Dean said that when visiting a city abroad, for example, MaaS potentially offered a quick and seamless way of getting around.

He also warned about seeing demand responsive transport as the great solution. "It is still likely to need an element of public funding to make it sustainable," he said.

Arriva customer projects director Birgit Wirth said she believed rail could be "the backbone" of the future of mobility, "because it's a mode of mass transportation". There was a need to invest in infrastructure but also to use the existing infrastructure in a more efficient way. Instead of being a place to which people drove and parked their cars, she argued, "a station could be a mobility hub", where rail could be developed alongside other modes and integrating them.

Asked about the barriers preventing this, she said there needed to be cooperation between the different modes of transport. There would not be one size to fit all. She believed there needed to be a lead from the government or local authorities.

In response to a question from the floor about whether cycles and electric scooters should be considered as public transport, Mr Champion said that rather than more modes of transport there needed to be a shared vision of the outcomes sought. "My view is that if we had a shared vision we could make progress step by step, but we need to decide before we start where we are going. Some of it is political – it needs a public conversation."

Asked about the future role of subsidies in transport, Mr Dean said the less they were relied on the better. Mr Champion said that subsidies took different forms. Aviation had huge hidden subsidies. Mr Dean said: "If we take the view that people have the option of living where they want without being able to drive or having a car, we will always need subsidy."

Simon Statham from Midlands Connect asked how the percentage of car journeys could be reduced from its current figure of 75%.

Mr Champion asked why a city like Leeds could not be more like Copenhagen: "The key is having a long-term vision," he said.

Summarising some of the themes of the discussions Mr Whelan said: "We have some choices ahead of us; we have some control over the markets; we can design policy and regulatory frameworks which can manage the markets without stifling innovation." But the pace of change needed to increase, and there were significant challenges ahead.

"The market model is not particularly clear," he continued. How could a fragmented transport market be better integrated? "There's a lot of food for thought here about how we might move forward, but there are some pretty hard challenges," he said.

Panellists gave their closing reflections. Hilary Chipping said there was “a high degree of consensus over where we need to get to”. She also noted the debate about whether devolved funding would lead to more effective decision making.

Naomi Green said: “FoM is a tool to help achieve what we want to achieve, not an end game. We need to look at transport as a whole rather than as different modes.” She called on the DfT and other departments to work with subnational transport bodies and local authorities “to define something clear we can work with”.

Tim Smith said “In many cases the solutions are here now. There are examples of integrated transport and so on. My concern is that that solutions are not being used.”

Ian Wright said: “Technology is not the challenge for the future of mobility.” The bigger challenges concerned regulation, commerciality and strong political leadership. In addition people needed incentives to nudge them towards making sustainable choices.

Ian Forbes said he was hopeful that change could happen because there were examples from cities in the UK and around the world that had got things right. He added that there was a need to reflect on what public transport would look like in future and who would provide it: “Our perceptions of what public transport is are going to change,” he said.

The full minutes of the workshop are available [here](#).