Promoting Cycling within Employer Green Commuter Plans

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Summary

Employers, particularly larger employers, in the UK are being encouraged to implement Green Commuter Plans (GCPs), with the aim of reducing the volume of car use for work journeys. To speed the process, the preparation of a GCP is increasingly being made a condition of granting planning permission for the development of a new centre of employment or commerce.

In the UK, the greatest attention and investment in promoting alternatives to car commuting has tended to focus on public transport and car-sharing schemes at the expense of cycling and walking. This paper explores the reasons for this undervaluing of "active" travel for work journeys and also looks at the effects of relying too heavily on car sharing and public transport in GCPs, and why such measures often do not deliver the anticipated reduction in car commuting.

Finally, the paper suggests – based on an actual case study – what employers, and other relevant players, can do practically to encourage and facilitate cycle use for work journeys.

The initial survey

The development of a GCP for an employer generally involves first a survey of existing employee travel patterns, together with data on distances travelled, time taken and locations from which employees commute. These latter are of use to public transport operators in demonstrating, for example, geographical areas where improvements in public transport may be necessary. A second tier of questions seeks information and opinions, such as the ranking of desirable improvements, which will allow an assessment of the potential for increasing the modal share of alternatives to cars carrying only the driver – such as walking, cycling, public transport, car-sharing, home-working, telecommuting, etc.

Good GCPs include recommendations for on- and off-site measures to improve infrastructure and services, as well as physical and non-physical measures for improving the appeal of these alternatives. These measures may involve a variety of parties, such as the local authority, the employer and public transport operators. Often action by one party encourages action by another, or even depends on action by another. For example, an employer may provide secure cycle parking at the workplace while the local authority simultaneously improves the highway environment for cyclists, or the employer may provide workplace information on public transport and offer tickets at discount rates while at the same time the public transport operator improves the services offered.

The alternatives promoted

In the UK, the greatest attention and investment in promoting alternatives to car commuting has tended to focus on public transport and car-sharing schemes, while cycling and walking have been relatively downplayed. Among the reasons for this is that many employers and local authorities perceive cycling as unsafe, while both walking and cycling are seen as too slow, severely limiting the distance that can be travelled, and to imply a low status incompatible with a "professional" image. The physical effort involved in these "active" means of travel is seen as making travellers hot and sweaty, so that cycling and walking are considered difficult in smart professional clothes.

Underlying the conventional assumptions appears to be the belief that replacing one motorised mode – the car – by another – largely the bus – may be more easily achieved than encouraging a complete switch to non-motorised modes. However, in the large number of travel surveys which the author has analysed in preparing advice for GCPs, the reason solo car users give for using the car is overwhelmingly "convenience", by which they mean in effect door-to-door travel at a time convenient to them (often overlooking the fact that parking problems at the destination may mean that the travel falls some way short of door-to-door). Many also claim that they need their cars for business travel during the working day, to carry equipment or other loads, and to cover the longer distances that many people travel to work. Seen against

this view, both public transport and car-sharing call for a considerable loss of flexibility, and efforts to encourage solo car drivers to switch modes often fail to deliver the hoped-for results.

Part of this stems from the economics of public transport provision. Providing complete peak-hour capacity on buses and trains would leave enormous over-capacity at other times, while providing a dense network to a dispersed workforce is very costly. Public transport must work to a timetable whose intervals reduce choice and flexibility of travel and many services do not fit the requirements of early-morning, late-night or shift working. Buses must generally travel on the same congested public roads as other traffic and consequently be subject to similar delays. The provision of special works buses by employers is very costly, while the requirement to follow set routes at set times again introduces inflexibility.

Objections to car-sharing rest on the three themes of inflexibility, choice of travelling companions and concerns about reliability. Potential car-sharers may start and finish work at different times, while many solo car drivers combine work journeys with such tasks as shopping, taking children to or from school and social trips. Many admit, too, that they do not wish to travel with certain people (nobody wants to share a car with their manager after a bad day!) and would prefer to be alone. Finally, nearly all require some guarantee that they will not be left stranded when travelling as a passenger if for some reason the car in which they expect to travel does not arrive. Experience has also shown that inducements offered by employers to encourage car-sharing, such as guaranteed, preferential or free parking, can be subject to abuse if not thoroughly planned. There are also indications that recruits to car-sharing schemes are often already using greener modes of travel, so that there is no environmental gain.

Challenging the assumptions

The conventional assumptions about cycling must not be allowed to pass into folklore as accepted truths. Many, even most, work journeys in urban areas do not involve long-distance travel. Recent surveys analysed by the author have shown that 40–50% of employees of companies situated around 1–2km from the centre of the city of Nottingham in central England (population about 450 000) travel less than 8km to work, generally accepted as a reasonable cycling distance. (It also emerges from these surveys that employees tend to consider the time taken to travel rather than distance as the criterion, with about 40 minutes considered the desirable maximum. Cycling at a speed of only 12km/h brings 8km within this band; in practice, of course, most will cycle at higher speeds than this, probably around 16km/h.)

The suggestion that cycling and walking must be sweaty athletic pursuits rather than everyday activities may be unwittingly reinforced by employers who offer changing and showering facilities as major inducements to cycle or walk to work. However, the common sight of people travelling by bicycle in business suits in cities in the Netherlands, Germany and the Scandinavian countries indicates that cycling at an appropriate pace is perfectly compatible with a "professional" appearance. There is in any case, at least in the UK, a helpful trend towards accepting less formal dress for occupations such as banking and working in government offices which have hitherto had rather strict "dress codes".

As a corollary of the fact that it is not economic to provide public transport at a level which would satisfy absolutely the heaviest demands there is a strong argument that public transport, however improved, would be incapable of absorbing the sheer number of journeys at present made by car – whereas cycling and, for appropriate lengths of journey, walking would. As personal modes of transport both offer the immediate availability that the solo car driver cherishes – without the burden of expensive or difficult parking at the destination. Both can be truly door-to-door.

There are, though, other compelling reasons for promoting these "active" modes of travel, from the points of view of both employers and the employees. First, both are healthy activities contributing to physical and mental wellbeing, and a healthy workforce is less likely to suffer high absenteeism for minor ailments and other health reasons. Regular, preferably daily, exercise for a 20–30min spell – wholly consistent with a daily ride to work – has been shown to be the most effective in preventing or delaying degenerative cardiac and respiratory disease.

A second and perhaps less tangible argument in favour of encouraging cycling and walking is that it is equitable. Both modes are available to almost everybody, whereas subsidising, say, public transport benefits the users but in effect penalises the remainder. This appears even less fair when solo car-drivers are virtually "bribed" by offers of travel concessions from employers to give up their cars in favour of public transport, while those who already use other modes from choice or necessity receive no such incentives.

The final argument is an economic one. Wholesale revision of the highway infrastructure is not necessary to effect marked improvements in the environment for cycling. Quite minor and hence inexpensive adjustments can make the conditions for cycling much more attractive. These need not involve elaborate wholly segregated networks but can be as simple as cycle/pedestrian crossings of obstacles such as waterways, major motor roads and railways to provide direct links between quiet roads, exemptions from the requirement to make the long detours frequently associated with one-way systems for motor traffic, and exemptions from road closures or manoeuvres forbidden to cars. Compared with the subsidies required for public transport (and even more the construction of motor roads) the expenditure involved is small. In one recent study in which the author was involved where a small and historic city in north-west England proposed to spend E19 million on a 3km stretch of guided busway to relieve city congestion it was successfully argued that far more could be done at a fraction of the cost by investing in measures to encourage cycling and walking.

What employers and others can do to encourage and facilitate walking and cycling for work journeys

The suggestions which follow are derived from the findings and subsequent recommendations in the production of a cycling and walking strategy devised by the author's consultancy for a large hospital campus about 5km north of the centre of the city of Nottingham (the hillier half of the city) but still well within the built-up area. The hospital employs some 4700 staff and a recent estimate has put the number of traffic movements directly associated with the hospital at 12 000 a day, or over 4.5 million each year. The campus is reasonably well served by public bus services but at the time of the preparation of the strategy there was still much scope for increasing the attractiveness of cycling and walking as means of reaching and travelling within the 45-hectare site.

A 1997 staff travel survey showed that about 75% of hospital employees live within 8km of the hospital, many much closer. Nevertheless 43% of those who travel by car – representing some 426 vehicles a day travelling to the site – live within that 8km radius. Some 40% use bicycles, even if only occasionally for leisure trips during the summer, but only 5% regularly cycle to work. The majority of employees – both cyclists and non-cyclists – said they would find cycling to work more attractive if there were a more cycle-friendly road environment, including dedicated cycle facilities; secure cycle parking at the hospital; workplace shower and changing facilities; greater respect from motorists; and some form of financial incentive.

Following detailed site examination and extensive consultation the author's consultancy made a number of recommendations, divided into on-site and off-site measures, and subdivided further into short-term and longer-term projects. They incorporate a mixture of deterrents to the use of the car and a greater number of incentives to cycle: both types of measure should be used in conjunction. Many have subsequently – and encouragingly – been implemented or are in process of implementation. We shall here consider only measures specifically relevant to cycling.

On-site measures (short term)

- Provide adequate cycle parking facilities, both 'long-stay' for an entire day or shift (secure, weatherproof and able to accommodate accessories) and "short-stay" which could comprise "Sheffield"-style inverted U-shape tubular steel racks.
- Offer showering and changing facilities, first by identifying existing under-utilised facilities, then later possibly installing new ones, located as close as possible to users' place of work.
- Introducing a standard speed limit not exceeding 25km/h for the entire campus, to be reinforced by clear and consistent signing. A 'slow speed' publicity campaign might well need to be repeated periodically.
- Information provided for people travelling to the hospital should include a clear statement that it is the hospital's policy to encourage the use of public transport, walking and cycling to reach the site.
- Thoughtless car parking should be strongly deterred.
- Traffic management measures should be modified to encourage or enforce greater compliance.

It was pointed out that personal security concerns (expressed mainly by walkers) would be best addressed by increasing the numbers of people legitimately cycling and walking within the campus. On issues such as these, cycling and walking should be considered together.

- All available forms of communication should be employed to reach existing and potential walking and cycling commuters, and should focus on the 'positive' the benefits of change.
- The existing cycle discount scheme (at present based some 11km away) should be made more attractive, particularly to women employees, by providing an on-site service of advice and repairs.
- A cycle travel allowance should be payable for short journeys by bicycle undertaken during the course of work. The closer the cycle allowance to the car allowance, the more likely employees are to consider cycling.
- For employees who are unable to cycle to work but need to make short trips during their working day, a pool of bicycles suitable for male and female employees should be established.
- For novice cyclists basic instruction in cycling skills, riding in traffic and simple roadside repairs would be useful, and a small library of information on cycling could be built up.
- Periodic promotional events such as a 'Commuter Challenge' in which a car user, a public transport user and a cyclist are pitted against each other to find quickest form of transport during peak traffic periods are good for attracting publicity.
- Senior members of staff should be seen to lead by example.
- For those who normally drive to work, but would be prepared to cycle when possible, some means of reimbursing unused car parking payment should be explored.

On-site measures (longer term)

- Develop a system of directional signs aimed specifically at pedestrians and cyclists moving around the hospital site.
- Reduce the volume of car parking within the hospital grounds, and move parking away from entrances to buildings .
- Give greater priority to pedestrians and cyclists moving around the hospital site: in principle non-motorised users should take priority over motorised traffic, as is accepted in 'traffic-calmed' neighbourhoods in continental Europe.
- Make provision to improve site access for pedestrians and cyclists.
- Map boards located around the site should be aimed to a greater extent at those travelling on foot and by cycle and include information on the best walking and cycling routes around the campus.
- A hospital guide to 'green commuting' could be developed with simple maps of cyclefriendly routes to the site and information on combining cycling with rail use.

Off-site measures

These would be largely the responsibility of the Nottingham City Council, the relevant highway authority

- The four major road junctions near the corners of the hospital site should be modified to make them more pedestrian- and cycle-friendly, possibly by introducing traffic signals at peak periods.
- Consider detailed improvements to dedicated cycle routes and cycle lanes leading to the hospital.
- Sign cycle-friendly routes from the nearest stations or stops on the nearby Light Rapid Transit line (currently under construction) to the hospital.
- Consider upgrading a disused rail line which currently provides an informal traffic-free alternative to a heavily-trafficked main road to the hospital by making surface and lighting improvements to provide an all-weather route for walkers and cyclists.

• The presence nearby of sports and leisure facilities and a number of schools would justify, in the longer term, an area-wide programme of improvements for pedestrians and cyclists through a combination of traffic management, traffic calming and dedicated facilities.

Elsewhere

These are not of course the only possible measures that can be used to encourage cycle use. In France two employer initiatives have been reported to encourage cycle commuting. The first involves holding a regular lottery – as far as the author recollects once a week – for which the winning ticket is only valid if the holder has cycled or walked to work that day. In the second case, at a plant where all employees have to pass a security desk, those who arrive by bicycle are awarded "points" which are accumulated over a period with prizes being awarded at regular intervals, monthly or quarterly, to those with the highest score. Both report significant increases in cycle use and in both cases the enthusiasm of the company's management for the scheme has been a powerful factor (one managing director, a cyclist, leads by example).

An initiative by a UK employer near the university city of Cambridge offers, on the other hand, rewards in time rather than money. Employees are credited with 5 minutes of paid holiday for every day on which they travel to work by non-motorised means, up to a maximum of two days in any year.

Conclusion

It cannot of course be argued that walking or cycling is appropriate for every employee, for every journey, on every occasion. The message must be to direct most attention and investment to these "active" modes of travel wherever possible and only then to consider motorised modes as possible secondary alternatives. What is necessary is to engender a culture in which considering cycling for travel to work is automatic: to introduce what, in the current culture of the UK at least, would represent a significant change in attitude. This is likely in both the short and long term to yield better results in attracting people away from the car than an over-emphasis on public transport, far more equitably, and at a far, far lower cost.