

can travel plans escape the planning ghetto?

After more than ten years' experience of travel plans in the UK, but limited travel plan adoption, it may be time to re-assess the best ways to engage business in travel planning, says **Helen Roby**



Above

There has been limited adoption of travel plans – are we now reaching a turning point?

Travel plans have been running in the UK since the late 1990s with varying degrees of success. Although there have been some that work well, many have failed to be adopted, and some have been adopted but then have been marginalised and have died as other issues became more important to the organisation.

In the current financial crisis, the role of travel planner is in some organisations being lost, as it is

not seen as a core function of the business. In other cases, what was initially conceived as a package of measures aimed at promoting 'greener' travel choices and reducing reliance on the car is perhaps perceived differently by the users and the businesses that implement them. We are now reaching a turning point in travel planning where that initial concept needs to adapt to these changing perceptions.

The differing perceptions of a travel plan can be illustrated by the story of two bus services run by a local bus operator, but also part-funded by the organisation which they served. These services had run for eight years, but were withdrawn at short notice by the bus operator, leaving passengers with much harder journeys to work. There were efforts made by the organisation's estates management department to find an alternative to the withdrawn services, but at short notice it was not possible to find a viable option.

Interestingly, the passengers were surprised that the bus services were the responsibility of estates management: they saw it as a human resources (HR) and environmental issue. The passengers felt that HR should take more responsibility for those who wished to travel sustainably, which importantly fitted in with the environmental views of the organisation. It was pointed out that to provide free car parking was inequitable and at odds with the environmental aims of the organisation, especially when no subsidy was given to those who travelled more sustainably by public transport. A suggestion was made that one way to support the passengers was to allow some flexibility in their start and finish times. And surely, as the service had been running for the last eight years, it should be considered part of their terms and conditions?

Never once in these conversations was the idea that the bus service was part of the travel plan mentioned. The staff framed it in a different way. They considered it to be more far-reaching,

workplace, suggesting that it was the responsibility of the staff to choose a mode of transport and place to live that ensured that they could meet their contractual working hours. Needless to say, the idea that the bus was part of the terms and conditions was also rejected, as it was considered a public service, despite the funding and the majority of passengers being employees.

This story raises some interesting issues surrounding travel plans. Travel plans have largely been the responsibility of organisations' estates or facilities management (FM) functions. This is inevitable when many are implemented as the result of a planning consent, followed by the installation of facilities such as bike sheds and car-share bays, all of which are very much an FM role.

However, there are many other areas that a travel plan supports in an organisation which are beyond the remit of FM, such as staff benefits, health and well-being, the environment, and corporate responsibility. This shows a mismatch not only between the perception of the users and that of the organisation, but also between the potential benefits of a travel plan and those who take responsibility for it. This lack of understanding of the full potential of a travel plan may be due largely to the way that travel plans have been developed as a transport planning tool, rather than as a business management tool to address the needs of the organisation.

This story is indicative of the situation pertaining to many travel plans; but it should be very different. Travel plans have the potential to be good both for business and for local authorities. For local authorities they can be relatively inexpensive, quick to implement, and a politically acceptable approach to reducing traffic congestion, and they may mitigate or reduce further road-building. They should also be good for business, offering the benefits of cost-savings through reducing rental of overflow car parking; reduced carbon emissions; improvements in corporate responsibility; improvements in recruitment and retention; and support for expansion.

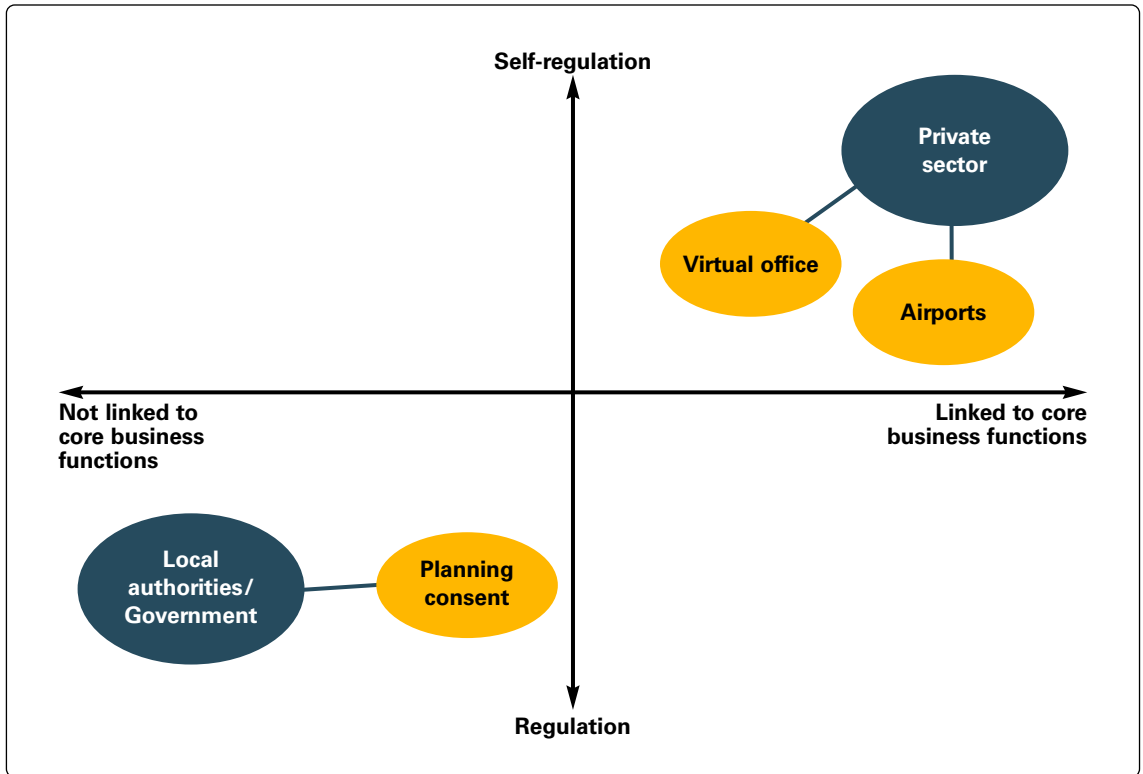
However, the adoption of travel plans still remains limited. This may be partly due to the use of the planning process as the main method to engage an organisation in travel planning.

Results from a survey of 86 local authorities by Rye *et al.* showed that only between 13% and 29% of organisations had travel plans, of which no more than 25% were voluntary.¹ A further survey of predominately private sector organisations suggested that the figure for voluntary travel plans could be as low as 16%.² The Rye *et al.* survey also found that 46 out of 86 local authorities were aware of travel plans in their areas that were written to comply with a planning consent but were never implemented.¹

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extending into HR issues and the environmental agenda, rather than a logistical transport function owned by estates management.

However, this was not how it was seen by the HR department, whose position was far from strategic or far-reaching, believing that issues surrounding the environment and transport were not their responsibility, but were correctly positioned in estates. Neither did they see that their role should encompass a responsibility for staff beyond the



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Fig. 1 The relative positions of local authorities and the private sector on travel plans

With this poor level of adoption, travel plans are only really ‘tinkering at the edges’, and are going to struggle to achieve on a wide scale the 18% reduction in traffic volumes forecast in the *Smarter Choices* report of 2004.³

Of course, the other fundamental problem with the use of the planning process as a way to implement travel plans is that this only applies to

travel plans, the travel plan obligation falls on property management rather than the tenants.

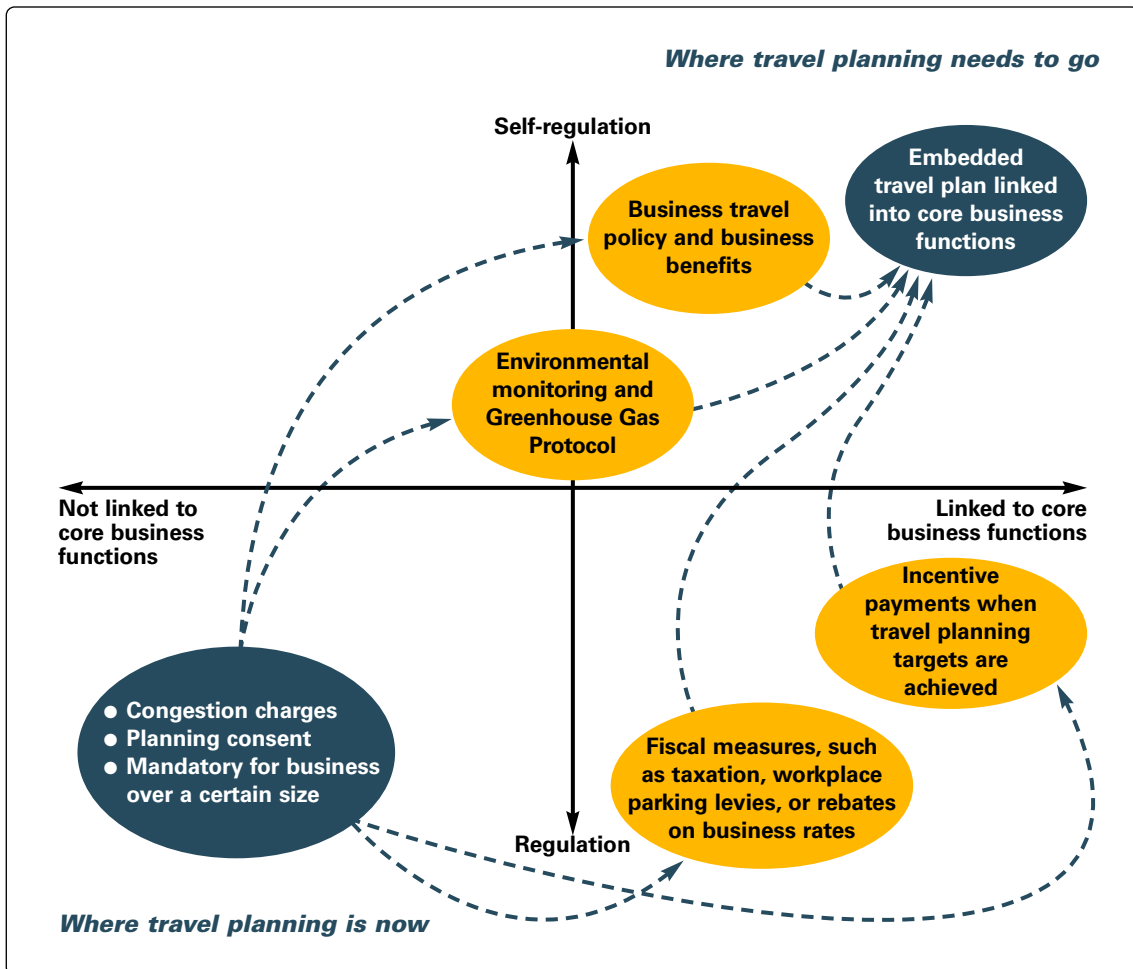
The results of the two surveys show that voluntary adoption is limited. This is not surprising as most businesses are not transport operators, and consequently, if a travel plan is sold to them as a transport initiative that reduces single-occupancy vehicle (SOV) numbers or brings about modal shift, they are going to struggle to see the relevance to their core operational functions.

This should perhaps be more unexpected, given that the Eddington Study suggested that a 5% reduction in travel time could generate cost savings of around £2.5 billion to the economy.⁴ As a major generator of congestion, with 55% of commuter journeys to urban centres, and 89% of delays caused by congestion in these urban areas,⁴ surely business should take a greater responsibility for the management and control of transport? However, a report from the CBI suggests that the problem lies with under-investment in the transport network, and that it is the Government’s responsibility to resolve the problem of congestion rather than the generators of the congestion.⁵

Another part of the problem with the poor levels of adoption of travel plans – particularly voluntary travel plans – lies in the way that they have been

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organisations that apply for planning permission. During the current recession fewer private sector organisations are expanding, and so the number of planning applications has fallen. Many businesses rent their premises, and although some of the rented premises are part of business park or retail



Above

Fig. 2 Potential routes for the development of a travel plan

framed around the aims and goals of central government and local authorities, which are very different from those of business. Local authorities are trying to reduce congestion and develop sustainable transport systems, whereas businesses are looking to improve efficiency and become more profitable and competitive.

Fig. 1 illustrates this dichotomy between the positions of business and government. On the vertical axis are the two extremes of regulation – self-regulation (for example a voluntary travel plan) at the top; and at the bottom regulation, which at present in the UK relates to a planning obligation or condition as part of a planning consent. On the horizontal axis are the extremes of whether a travel plan is linked into core business functions or not. When a travel plan does not link into core business functions, it does not relate directly to the operational needs of the organisation, but concentrates on transport issues such as modal

shift or a reduction in SOVs, which are likely to be seen as peripheral.

However, travel plans can relate to core business functions when they become integral to the way the organisation works. The most obvious example is when the organisation is itself a transport operator, such as an airport, where access is paramount. But only a limited number of organisations are transport operators. Nevertheless, a travel plan can become core to business functions as part of the virtual office or smarter working practices that are embedded into the day-to-day function of the organisation. Alternatively, a travel plan could be developed to support a range of organisational needs, including recruitment and retention or corporate responsibility issues, particularly environment or social concerns.

Local authorities and the Government are understandably concerned about managing congestion at the macro level of the transport

network. For local authorities the main method of engaging business in travel planning has been through the planning process – in effect through regulation, although local authorities have also been working through the voluntary route. However, it should be noted that a survey conducted by the author² found that none of the voluntary travel plans were instigated as a result of local authority intervention. The problem is that the aims and motivations of the Government and local authorities concentrate on regulation and transport initiatives that are not considered core to business, and so are firmly fixed in the bottom left-hand quadrant of Fig. 1 – regulation and no links into core business functions.

In reality, the private sector would prefer self-regulation – which can work if the travel plan is seen to help the business to become more efficient and profitable. However, this pushes the approach of business in the opposite direction to that of the Government and local authorities – towards the top right-hand quadrant in Fig. 1. For a travel plan to deliver a good business case to the private sector, it needs to deliver benefits to an organisation's wider goals, and these may not be directly related to transport.

This also affects what the measures of success will be. The measures of success need to be meaningful to an organisation, and are unlikely to be those of modal shift and a reduction in SOV numbers. Even for the transport-related benefits to business, the measures of success of a travel plan concentrate on the micro level, which is in control of the organisation. These measures may be whether the car-share bays are full, whether the need for and cost of an overflow car park has been removed, or whether car park overcrowding and congestion in accessing the site has been alleviated.

However, there are a range of issues which, although not directly related to transport, are nevertheless affected by it and are equally if not more important to a business. The health and well-being of staff affects productivity, so reducing the stress caused by parking problems or lateness to work can potentially deliver productivity gains. Problems of retention where staff are unwilling to make 'that journey' every day, or problems of recruitment where staff are unable to get to the site by any means other than car, can be overcome if access is improved.

Offering discounts on public transport or the ability to work virtually can improve the capacity of the organisation to employ the best person for the job, because they are seen as the employer of choice. The facility to work virtually means that location is less of a barrier to employment, so the organisation is able to deepen the labour market. Should the organisation be in a position to expand, being seen as an employer of choice aids the

process of recruiting additional staff, particularly in areas of high employment. And by managing car parking and office capacity more efficiently, it is easier to manage expansion within an existing site.

Travel plans need to become more holistic, where the *purpose of access*, which is to communicate and work together, rather than the *process of travel* is at the centre of the policy. A travel plan needs to be reframed as a business process that helps an organisation to work more efficiently, by improving communication and working practices, rather than as a transport initiative that has few links. Travel

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plans need to evolve to become a strategy that identifies the most efficient ways to work and communicate – which may not necessarily involve travel, either for commuting or business travel. As a strategy, a travel plan needs to be more of a business process that targets support at a range of areas within the organisation, rather than an isolated function within estates or facilities management – so that it becomes embedded into the way the organisation works, rather than sitting on the periphery.

Travel planning has now been established within the UK for over ten years, and if it is to achieve the 18% reductions in traffic levels suggested in the *Smarter Choices* report,³ it is time to re-assess the best ways to engage business in travel planning. Should travel planning continue along the same regulatory planning path that has existed to date? Is it time to look for another regulatory route, or to be much smarter about 'selling' the idea of travel planning to businesses in a way that delivers real meaning and benefits to them?

The answer to all these questions is yes. The challenge is for travel planning to migrate from Fig. 1's bottom left-hand quadrant of regulation and no links to core business functions to the top right-hand quadrant, where businesses choose to adopt travel plans because they see the link into core business functions that can improve efficiency. Fig. 2 illustrates the possible routes that could be taken to achieve this aim.

There is still a need to use the planning process, particularly with new-builds, to ensure that access is

designed in at the outset, reducing the need to retrofit at a later stage. However, if travel planning is to make a real difference, a much more extensive regulatory approach is needed – an approach that engages most if not all business. For example, the scheme in Seattle, where all businesses that employ more than 100 employees are required by law to have a ‘commute program’ (the US equivalent of a travel plan), could provide an alternative model.

But any regulatory approach such as this, while it may engage more businesses, runs the risk of gaining only the bare minimum of support from business, as it would still lack links to core organisational functions. A combination of incentives and disincentives through a tax scheme could be an alternative approach, with, for example, reductions in corporation tax offered for businesses

benefits business, including critical functions like human resources and finance, so that it is not rejected in the way described in the opening story.

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Notes

- 1 T. Rye, E. Young and S. Ison: ‘Using the land-use planning process to secure travel plans: an assessment of progress to date’. Presentation to the 87th Annual Meeting of the Transportation Research Board, Washington, DC, USA, 2008
- 2 H. Roby: ‘Workplace travel plans: past, present and future’. *Journal of Transport Geography*, 2008, Vol. 18 (1), 23-30
- 3 S. Cairns, L. Sloman, C. Newson, J. Anable, A. Kirkbride and P. Goodwin: *Smarter Choices – Changing the Way We Travel*. Department for Transport, 2004. www.dft.gov.uk/pgr/sustainable/smarterchoices/ctwww/
- 4 *Time to Change Gear? Assessing the UK Transport Networks*. CBI, 2009. www.cbi.org.uk/pdf/20090218-CBI-Time-to-Change-Gear.pdf
- 5 R. Eddington: *The Eddington Transport Study. The Case for Action: Sir Rod Eddington’s Advice to Government*. HM Treasury/Department for Transport. HMSO, 2006. www.dft.gov.uk/adobepdf/187604/206711/executivesummary.pdf

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that implement travel plan measures or install high-quality video conferencing equipment. The regulatory route of the tax system would help to raise the profile of a travel plan within business, as it would be of interest to finance departments and would start to make links into core business functions.

For travel plans or access strategies to be taken seriously within business (and to move away from the ‘trainspottery’ or ‘nerdy’ image that transport can have), there is a need for a combination of regulation and promotion that links into core business functions. This means that there is a need for both central and local government to be much smarter about how to promote the concept of travel plans or access management, covering commuting, business travel, and the use of virtual technologies. But it must also be realised that, for most businesses, transport issues are not going to be the main focus, and so travel plans need to be reframed to help address issues that are important to business, recognising that local authority aims are likely to be seen as an added benefit.

This approach could help to prevent travel plans from becoming siloed within estates or facilities management functions. It could instead help travel planning to be seen in a broader context that