

Chapter 8

SMARTER CHOICES ITS FUTURE APPLICATION

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INTRODUCTION

“I am writing to let you know of some very exciting results showing falls in traffic of over 10% and similar double-digit increases in public transport, cycling and walking in just over two years..... smarter choices can bring substantial benefits on improving the environment and health as well as reducing congestion. It may, therefore, be a strong consideration when your authority sets future budgets”. So wrote Gillian Merron, then Transport Minister in May 2007. She was referring to the large-scale implementation of Smarter Choices measures that is being undertaken in the Department for Transport’s three pilot Sustainable Travel Demonstration Towns, Darlington, Peterborough and Worcester.

This Chapter contends that “Smarter Choices” – the term given to describe a range of “soft measures” to influence travel behaviour – should become a central element of local transport policy and there should be a major expansion in the level and range of Smarter Choices activity being carried out on the ground. This is justified by the close alignment of Smarter Choices with the principles and objectives of contemporary transport policy – to manage travel demand and to promote the use of alternatives to the car - and by the growing evidence of the major positive impact Smarter Choices measures can have, relatively quickly and inexpensively.

The Chapter provides justification for why Smarter Choices are so effective and gives suggestions for what a comprehensive and intensively applied Smarter Choices strategy might look like. It then goes on to consider what the challenges are in getting us there and how these should be overcome.

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Finally, it argues that Smarter Choices is supportive of, and suggestive of a change in emphasis of the purpose and process of contemporary transport planning – shifting towards the role of a ‘customer-focused service’, away from that of ‘infrastructure provider’.

WHAT ARE SMARTER CHOICES?

The term “Smarter Choices” was coined in 2004 by a report to Government that sought to evaluate and measure the impact of a range of “soft measures” to influencing travel patterns (“Smarter Choices – Changing the way we travel” Dft, 2004). These measures include a diverse range of activities from school and employer travel plans, to individualised travel marketing, to car clubs/car sharing schemes, general awareness marketing campaigns and the use of internet communication technologies (ICT) to reduce the need for travel. Table 8.1 illustrates the range of activities that fall under the Smarter Choices umbrella.

What this disparate set of activities - often implemented by people sitting in different sections of the Local Authority, or indeed in other agencies, and often funded through a variety of different sources - share in common is their purpose and rationale. They focus on seeking to affect individual travel behaviour change, primarily through encouraging the uptake of alternatives to the private car, as well as seeking to reduce the need to travel. They do this at the most fundamental level by providing information to people. Often, people with car keys at their fingertips simply are not aware of the alternatives that are available and rarely stop to consider any other mode before making a journey. By filling in information gaps and challenging misperceptions about alternative travel modes, Smarter Choices measures seek to allow people to make more informed travel choices. Above and beyond this though, they seek to give people motivation for changing behaviour (predominantly through communicating the personal benefits that could accrue) and through incentivising and rewarding sustainable travel choices.

A key objective of the Smarter Choices report, as part of evaluating the impact of these different measures, was to consider what sort of impact Smarter Choices could have if they were co-ordinated and applied in a comprehensive and intensive way. Whilst acknowledging the difficulty in measuring this, the report concluded that the impact of a successful, comprehensive Smarter Choices Strategy could be to reduce peak hour traffic by as much as 14-21% and off-peak traffic by as much as 7-13%.

WHAT MAKES SMARTER CHOICES SO GOOD?

There are several strong arguments for the promotion of Smarter Choices.

Most fundamentally, they have a strong policy justification: national through to local transport policy has – in theory at least – aligned itself to what has been called “the new transport agenda”. This provides two guiding principles – encouraging the use of alternative modes of travel to the car and reducing the need to travel. The justification for this policy emerged initially from the recognition that former “predict and provide” policies could never keep pace with the potential growth in demand for car travel and that transport policy now needs to try to manage

Table 8.1 The range of Smarter Choices interventions and their potential impact

School travel planning	Focus on journey to school and seeking to promote reduction in use of car. Typically includes the school producing its own School Travel Plan as well as participating in marketing events such as Bike to School and Walk to School weeks.
Workplace travel plans	A package of measures put together by an employer to encourage more sustainable travel, and often targeting single occupancy car use. These often include car sharing schemes, teleworking and events to promote walking, cycling etc.
Organisational travel plans	Similar to above, but focus on major public destinations, such as hospitals and looking more widely at access by visitors as well as staff.
Residential travel plans / area wide travel plans	A newer area in travel planning, often focused on large areas of new development, which seeks to ensure that all aspects of the new development are brought within the travel planning process.
Individualised travel marketing / personalised travel planning	Targeting individuals through their place of residence, ITM involves offering bespoke travel resources to individuals focused upon specific travel needs and requests.
Public transport information and marketing	Provision of high quality public transport information available in wide range of formats and locations, together with marketing campaigns to promote services.
Travel Awareness campaigns	Campaigns through a range of media and events to communicate sustainable travel messages. Can include general background campaigns or specific themed campaigns such as Walk/Cycle to School weeks, In Town Without My Car etc.
Car clubs	Individuals pay a membership fee to join a club which gives them access to vehicles in their neighbourhood which they can pre-book, enabling access to a car without necessity for ownership.
Car share schemes	Schemes that aim to encourage individuals to share private vehicles for particular journeys
Internet communication technologies (ICTs)	A range of ICTs can be used to reduce the need to travel, including video-conferencing, home-working, internet shopping, home deliveries and remotely accessing services (such as shopping, banking etc.).

demand to limited capacity. But this policy also complements growing concern with environmental sustainability (and the negative impact of transport patterns and trends on this), increasing recognition of the links between transport and health, as well as the perennial issues of congestion, road safety and social inclusion.

There is also strong theoretical justification for Smarter Choices. It is increasingly well recognised that just providing alternatives to car travel on its own will not necessarily lead to travel behaviour change. Most fundamentally, people need information and awareness about the alternatives if they are to contemplate them, but equally they need a motivation for changing travel patterns. Where infrastructure improvements – such as new bus priority schemes or cycle routes - have been complemented by marketing activities, the uptake has been seen to be significantly higher than where they are not marketed and promoted.

There is now a growing body of empirical evidence to demonstrate just how effective Smarter Choices can be. Case Study 8.1 highlights the level of behavioural change that has been monitored in Darlington, one of the Government's pilot Sustainable Travel Demonstration Towns.

Case Study 8.1 The impact of Darlington's Sustainable Travel Demonstration Town Project

Darlington is one of the Government's three pilot Sustainable Travel Demonstration Towns. In 2004, it received over £3m in additional revenue funding to implement a package of Smarter Choices measures including an overarching marketing campaign and community events, employer and school travel planning activities and an individualised travel marketing programme across the whole town.

Independent monitoring of travel behaviour before and during the programme has revealed some significant changes. In the area targeted for individualised travel marketing in year 2, there had been an 11% reduction in car use, 25% increase in walking and 79% increase in cycling, compared to before the project started.

But the project has been showing a major impact across the whole town. In areas where no ITM activity was conducted, car trips had reduced by 6%, walking was up 11% and cycling up 53%, compared to before the project started.

Another very useful attribute of Smarter Choices is their relative ease of implementation and low cost. The timeline for implementing Smarter Choices measures can be measured in months rather than years (as is the case for many physical infrastructure projects) and produces equally quick results.

The low cost and high impact of Smarter Choices means that they provide excellent value for money. The Smarter Choices report attempted to estimate cost benefit ratios (CBRs) based on the empirical evidence and suggested that CBRs could be as high as 10:1 – for every pound spent on Smarter Choices, £10 of benefit accrue.

Another benefit that is often overlooked is that Smarter Choices measures – if implemented correctly – can be uniquely positive experiences. Take individualised travel marketing for example, where bespoke information and travel resources are offered to residents of an area by household visits, phone calls or by mail. Those who require some travel information or want some advice participate, those who are happy with their travel options simply decline and are then left alone. Those people who do then change travel behaviour do so because they derive some personal benefit – typically health benefits, money-saving or better use of time. Nobody is being coerced into changing behaviour – in stark contrast to other methods of demand management.

Because of the positive way in which Smarter Choices measures are received and their focus on helping individuals, it potentially provides great public relations material for the sponsoring organisation, such as the Local Authority or the employer or school. For example, individuals who have lost weight as a result of taking up cycling, or those who spend more time with their children as a result of walking them to school provide great human interest stories for local media and for local politicians to latch onto.

WHAT SHOULD FUTURE SMARTER CHOICES STRATEGIES LOOK LIKE?

If the above arguments about the benefits and strengths of Smarter Choices are accepted, then there is justification for Smarter Choices to be far more intensively applied and to be integral to local transport policy and delivery across the country.

In which case, what should a Smarter Choices strategy contain? Below, a couple of illustrations are provided about the potential components of a comprehensive Smarter Choices strategy.

An illustration of a Smarter Choices Package from a Sustainable Travel Demonstration Town

Given the successes being demonstrated in the pilot Sustainable Demonstration Travel Towns, a good starting point is to examine the activities that have been undertaken there, as a benchmark for the scale and type of activity that could be implemented. Case Study 2 summarises key components of Darlington's Sustainable Travel Demonstration Town Project, which is locally branded as "Local Motion".

A more radical future strategy – illustration of the Smarter Choices strategy proposals in Cambridgeshire's TIF bid

With Smarter Choices being focused primarily upon reducing car driver trips, such strategies will be more successful where a broader approach is being taken to promote alternatives and to manage car travel.

Government's Transport Innovation Fund (TIF) is encouraging bids from Local Authorities to implement road user charging schemes, which will be complemented by major investment in alternative modes. In circumstances where car drivers are going to incur a financial penalty and there is to be major investment in alternative modes, Smarter Choices could play a major role in helping people to migrate to these new alternatives. Indeed it may be a political

Case Study 8.2 **The components of the Darlington Sustainable Travel Demonstration Town Smarter Choices Package**

Project branding and overall marketing and communications strategy: the Darlington project has been branded “Local Motion”. A high profile campaign launch was undertaken and all project materials are branded. A Local Motion Members club has been set up and people who sign up receive a membership card that entitles them to a number of discounts and ensures they receive the regular Local Motion newsletter that further promotes project activities.

Community events / competitions: to support the above, regular community events are run. This includes manning Local Motion stalls at general community events (such as festivals), as well as specific Local Motion events such as Walking Festivals, organised bike rides and school and employer activities (see below). Various competitions have also been run, such as the Step Up Challenge, where 12 individuals won places on a 12-week active lifestyle programme.

Information materials: a fundamental aspect of the initiative has been to ensure that basic information about travel choices is provided comprehensively, to a high quality, through a range of media. Customised bus timetables have been developed and are displayed on all bus stops within the town, new town-wide bus and cycle maps have been produced. A bespoke on-line journey planner has been created.

School travel planning: 90% of the Borough’s schools are developing or implementing active School Travel Plans. In addition to each school’s individual plan, the schools are encouraged to participate in a range of town-wide events. The “Medal Motion” campaign has subsumed the walk / cycle to school week activities and individual pupils and individual schools compete over a two-week period to notch up the greatest number of walk/cycle/bus trips. The students receive bronze, silver or gold medals depending upon the number of days they travel by sustainable modes. In addition, three quarters of primary school students are undertaking pedestrian training and a over a half are undertaking cycle training to national standards. Eight schools have participated in the “Bike It” initiative which funds a development officer to work with schools to further engage pupils in promoting cycling.

Individualised travel marketing campaign: all 40,000 households in the town have been approached over a 3-year period to take part in individualised travel marketing. A team of locally recruited and trained Travel Advisors, working from a project office, go door to door to offer free travel information, advice and encouragement to householders to try out alternative modes. At the same time, they offer residents the opportunity of becoming Local Motion Club members, which provides them with a discount card and means they receive the regular Local Motion newsletters. Over the last two years over 10,000 individuals have been signed up to the Club. They also offer residents the opportunity to take part in “Local Motion Challenges” to increase the amount of walking, cycling or public transport use they undertake. Incentives are provided for those participating in the Challenge.

Employer travel planning: an Employer Travel Planning officer continues to work with employers across the town to encourage them to adopt travel plans and assist them in their development. This work has benefited from being able to tap into broader Local Motion activities, such as running community events with employers, such as Commuter Challenges and providing individualised travel marketing services for employers, courtesy of the ITM office above.

Cycle training and cycle loan schemes: free adult cycle training is being offered and promoted through the Individualised Travel Marketing Programme. For adults who don’t own a bike and want to trial it before deciding to buy one, a cycle loan scheme is run by the Council, where individuals loan a bike for a month with the option of discounted purchase at the end of the period. This has been so successful there is now a 3-month waiting list!

Car sharing scheme: the Council is part of Regional Liftshare scheme which provides a community wide car sharing database, promoted primarily through employers, but accessible to anyone.

imperative to exhaust the 'voluntary' mechanisms of promoting behaviour change, through the use of Smarter Choices, before the 'obligatory' method of road user charging is introduced.

One such example is Cambridgeshire County Council's emerging TIF bid. Cambridge has one of the fastest growing sub-regional economies in the country and job creation has grown at a rate far exceeding local workforce availability. As a consequence, it is now planned to significantly increase the volume of housing in Cambridge – over 20,000 dwellings are planned over the next 15-20 years. Given the historic nature of the City and the limited ability or desirability to increase road capacity, it is considered that the only way to accommodate this population and employment growth without major congestion problems is to promote a radical modal shift away from the car to alternative modes. The TIF bid proposes a peak hour area-wide road user charging scheme, together with major improvements to the public transport network and the cycling network.

But in order to fully realise the benefits of these investments, a comprehensive Smarter Choices Strategy is also integral to the bid. This is in recognition of the fact that the provision of high quality alternatives in its own right will not automatically guarantee that people will take up these modes and continuous marketing of these alternatives is therefore required. But above and beyond this, securing a radical mode shift away from the car entails something of a cultural shift to embrace these alternatives. For example, whilst Cambridge enjoys the highest levels of cycling of any city in the UK, it does not follow that new residents coming in to Cambridge will automatically embrace the cycling culture and take up cycling to the same degree as existing residents. Therefore, it will be critical to work intensively with these new residents to raise their awareness about the availability and benefits of cycling and to enable them to take it up by offering bespoke advice, training and assistance.

The proposed Smarter Choices package, currently estimated to cost in the order of £1m per year, includes the following elements:

- ❑ Marketing and promotion: to ensure that all individuals across the area are fully aware of the overall objectives of transport strategy and understand the impacts of the travel decisions they make. This includes development of a Marketing Strategy, creation of a brand and area-wide marketing and promotional campaign, together with an associated calendar of promotional events.
- ❑ Information services: to ensure that individuals across the area are provided with accurate, up-to-date information regarding the travel choices available to them. This includes production of consistently branded information available through a range of media and outlets (printed, internet-based etc.). Resources aimed at particular target groups (e.g. workplace) to be designed and developed in consultation with the target markets.
- ❑ Organisational travel planning: to ensure that organisations across the area are provided with effective and co-ordinated advice and support services that helps them to develop travel plans for their establishments. This will cover workplace travel planning, school travel planning and organisational travel plans (e.g. major public destinations such as hospitals, rail stations etc.).

- Individualised travel marketing (ITM): to provide targeted, bespoke information and resources for those requiring it. This will include a rolling programme of household-based ITM particularly targeting new residential developments and people who have recently moved, as well as offering the service in workplaces and via a “Travel Demand Management Advice Centre” – a facility in the community where people can get access to all travel information services and can book appointments to speak to a Travel Advisor. This will also include development of a range of incentives and services to strengthen the offer, such as public transport season ticket or cycle purchase discounts for new residents, free cycle training offers etc.
- Rationalising car use: acknowledging that the private car will continue to have a role, ensuring that people do have this option available to them in a manner that supports the rest of the strategy. This will include the ongoing and active promotion of the existing local car sharing database, the creation of a city wide car-club and provision of advice to organisations on fleet management.
- Smarter living and working activity: to ensure that individuals have access to, and are aware of, a range of options to reduce their need to travel. This will include development of an Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Strategy for the area, which will seek to establish pilot projects for using ICT in a more intensive, co-ordinated way to reduce the need to travel. This could include partnership schemes with retailers to promote home delivery or partnerships with ICT providers to promote the deployment of teleconferencing/teleworking facilities in the area.
- Residential travel planning and smarter choices development control activity: to ensure that all new development is smarter choices ‘compliant’ in terms of design and provision of associated measures. This focus is particularly important given the large scale planned development around Cambridge and will include preparation of supplementary planning guidance on securing effective travel plans through the planning process and developing programmes of smarter choices activities within the new development areas.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES IN GETTING THERE?

The above two illustrations are intended to demonstrate what a more ambitious and comprehensive Smarter Choices strategy could look like. However, in order to make this level of intervention commonplace in Local Authority areas across the UK, some significant challenges need to be overcome.

There is a variety of reasons for why Smarter Choices are not being applied intensively at the moment, but three are highlighted below, before considering potential ways of addressing them:

- Scepticism and lack of awareness
- Lack of funding
- Lack of skills / training and sharing of experience

Raising awareness, communicating the benefits and making the case

Despite the benefits being claimed for Smarter Choices, there is still much scepticism about what Smarter Choices can deliver, often held at Senior Officer and Member level.

Without generalising too much, the advocates and practitioners of Smarter Choices are often “outsiders” – people who have come into transport planning from “non-traditional” backgrounds and might be relatively junior. Conversely, the fund-holders and decision makers often come from more traditional backgrounds, where this type of intervention is sometimes poorly understood. To non-practitioners, Smarter Choices (even the term itself) can appear woolly. The link between say, preparing an employer travel plan, or conducting an Individualised Travel Marketing campaign and achieving a tangible change in travel behaviour that can be seen on the ground appears weak to many people.

So how do we convince these people of the potency of Smarter Choices? Best practice manuals and reports on empirical evidence are all very well but how many Senior Officers or local politicians will have the time – or inclination - to read them? What is required is a concerted effort to educate the fund-holders and decision makers about what Smarter Choices entail, how they work and what the benefits are. This can be done through a number of ways.

First, specially convened briefing sessions can prove very fruitful, where the details of what Smarter Choices measures are and how they work are explained and question and answer sessions are encouraged. In Darlington for example, briefing sessions have been held with politicians to explain what is being done and give further detailed information about the different elements of the Local Motion project. To garner support for the Individualised Travel Marketing Programme, sessions were organised with stakeholders where the Travel Advisors reported on their experiences whilst conducting the ITM and fed back the ‘word on the doorstep’. This proved extremely helpful to the stakeholders in improving their understanding of how the ITM worked in practice and by speaking to the Travel Advisors they were offered reassurance about how they were conducting the job.

Second of all, while the growing body of empirical evidence for the efficacy of Smarter Choices is helpful, this evidence can be presented in ways to help garner support and improve understanding. Data measuring travel behaviour change can still seem a little suspect to sceptics and it is acknowledged amongst Smarter Choices advocates that measuring behaviour change is problematic. However, there are mechanisms for reporting this data in a more helpful manner to fund-holders and decision-makers. First of all, substantiating travel behaviour change data with ‘real’ data measuring physical changes is useful. In Darlington, the Local Authority officers responsible for the Local Motion project have substantiated the reported behaviour change (as shown in Figure 8.1 above) with a range of other data sources. Physical monitoring of cycling levels through automatic cycle counts at a range of sites across the town have shown a doubling of cycling levels since the project began. Automatic traffic data counts on the approaches to the town’s inner ring road have also shown that traffic has declined by

4%. Similarly, snapshot surveys in schools are reinforcing the evidence that walking and cycling to school are increasing and car use is reducing. These all help to demonstrate that reported behaviour change is being translated into actual physical differences that can be measured ‘in the flesh’.

A final aspect of presenting the evidence is to ensure that it is presented in a way to suit your target audience. For transport policy colleagues, reporting on mode shift or reduction in vehicle kilometres as a result of Smarter Choices interventions will present the case effectively. But for fund-holders, extrapolating a cost:benefit ratio from the above can be useful. For environmental planners, or perhaps to support an emerging Climate Change policy, converting this vehicle kilometre reduction into a CO₂ equivalent could be appropriate. For health colleagues, impact on health can be presented, in terms of the increase in active travel being undertaken. In Darlington, monitoring of the Individualised Travel Marketing Programme for last year revealed that 50% of people who said they had changed travel behaviour reported health benefits. And, as eluded to earlier, for politicians and for media, having access to case studies of individuals’ changes, to provide the human interest, can be extremely valuable.

Securing Funding

Advocates often complain that funding is the major hurdle. Many Smarter Choices measures are often classed as a revenue activity, whereas most local transport funding is capital and the opportunities to find appropriate funding pots may appear difficult. However, it could be argued that the funding problem – as real as it is – is in fact a symptom of this broader point about garnering support from decision-makers and fund-holders and ensuring they are entirely convinced about the purported benefits of Smarter Choices. When something is worth doing, Local Government has traditionally been excellent at finding a mechanism for doing it. What’s key is the right people believing that it is a funding priority. Top-slicing of LTP monies, or capitalising certain Smarter Choices measures by integrating them with other local transport plan schemes have all been successfully done. Local Area Agreements can provide the opportunity for Local Authorities to exercise more discretion about where and how they spend Central Government monies. But equally, it is up to advocates to make the case that Smarter Choices should compete for revenue funding with other calls on local government revenue support.

Improving implementation, sharing best practice and training up practitioners

As a relatively nascent area of transport planning, the art of Smarter Choices is developing all the time. Since it has been, until recently, a rather peripheral activity, knowledge of detailed implementation and good practice resides with a disparate range of practitioners, often working in a relatively isolated manner. Transforming Smarter Choices into a significant workstream across Local Authority areas will also require a major expansion in the number of practitioners. It is likely that many of these practitioners will be drawn in from non-traditional backgrounds – for example, school travel planning professionals often originate from the education sector, such as teachers. Therefore, a key challenge is to transfer knowledge and good practice and to recruit and train future practitioners.

Good practice guides are becoming more widespread (see for example DfT, 2007a; DfT, 2007b; Tapestry & DfT, 2005). In some areas, experience is being shared by occasional meetings of practitioners, such as through the Regional TravelWise groups, but undoubtedly a more systematic approach to sharing knowledge and creating and maintaining networks of specialists will help with transfer of knowledge and development of techniques.

Smarter Choices remains a rather peripheral item in most university transport courses at the moment and in terms of equipping future professionals with the awareness and skills to help develop Smarter Choices activities, it is essential that more is done to ensure sufficient attention is given to this work area within transport planning degrees. The Transport Planning Society and Institute for Highways and Transportation is about to launch a Professional Transport Planning Qualification, including a National Occupancy Standards unit on travel planning. In due course, such developments may help to raise the profile and standards of work in this area.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A MORE CUSTOMER-FOCUSED STYLE OF TRANSPORT PLANNING

As stated at the outset, this Chapter contends that Smarter Choices should be a major element of transport planning activity across the land, given its synergies with the aims of contemporary transport planning and the growing evidence of its potency. The Chapter has suggested what a comprehensive Smarter Choices strategy might look like and considered what some of the challenges are in getting there.

But underlying this is perhaps a slightly more subtle point about the central role of Smarter Choices in future transport planning. By definition, Smarter Choices focuses upon the individual, and hence lends itself to a customer-service oriented form of transport planning. As a corollary, “predict and provide” focused transport planning in the role of infrastructure provider.

The challenge for contemporary transport planning is to change attitudes and behaviours and a key function therefore has to be to enable this change. With sustainability – particularly in relation to climate change – having become high on the political agenda and in people’s consciousnesses, a large proportion of the population is wanting to know how they can make a difference and Smarter Choices presents an opportunity for us to respond to this demand.

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