

Transport planning performance indicators, democracy and best value

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- The duty of best value requires local authorities to provide services that are in tune with the needs and wishes of their communities. At the same time, the Government requires local authorities to develop local transport plans that comply with national policy on integrated transport. However, there is evidence to suggest that the transport system that local communities want does not necessarily meet the guidelines set by central government. As part of the best value process, local authorities will be measured against a series of performance indicators. Critically, for transport, no strategic indicator has been suggested. This is curious since transport planners have considerable experience of setting strategic objectives and evaluating their plans against them. The local transport plan system could be developed to double as a performance plan for transportation and, through this, the development of local solutions could provide feedback to inform and develop national policy.

Keywords: transport planning; local government; management

Introduction

The 1999 Local Government Act imposes on local authorities a duty 'to secure continuous improvement ... having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness.' It also imposes a duty to consult. This paper examines how these principles interact with local transport plans and how achievement of national strategic transport objectives can be squared with local aspirations.

2. It has been stated that: 'Best value means that councils will be required to deliver sustained improvement in the quality and quantity of services that local people want at a price that they are prepared to pay. Best value is an opportunity for local government to put local people first.'¹

3. Best value requires performance, therefore, to be defined in the context of what people want and are prepared to pay for. This requires the development of performance indicators (PIs) that check on economy, efficiency and effectiveness and that provide an impetus for continuous improvement.

4. Demonstrating best value therefore needs

to be built on a process that can be represented simply, as shown in Fig. 1. Any cyclical process, by definition, does not have a beginning or an end but, within the context of best value, the fundamental service review focuses on two activities within the virtuous circle

- (a) understanding customer needs
- (b) designing the service.

As part of their response to best value, therefore, authorities need to develop this cyclical process which is built on consultation and involvement of all its stakeholders and is driven by a robust system of measuring performance.

5. In applying this principle to a service such as transportation, this review needs to consider not only the way in which the service is organized and structured within the council, but also the way in which the service responds to and reflects the needs of its community. In other words, it is not just a quasi-competitive tendering exercise; it must also examine how the community is involved in the design and implementation of individual transportation projects.

An integrated transport strategy

6. In addition to the need to satisfy the requirements of best value, the transportation service also has to conform to central government transport policies. Following considerable debate led by both the previous Conservative Administration and the new Labour Government, the first Transport White Paper² in a generation was published in July 1998. It was careful to define integration, not just as integration between modes of transport, but also with

- (a) the environment
- (b) land use planning
- (c) policies for education, health and wealth creation.

7. It perceived, therefore, the need for the transportation system to respond to the needs for mobility and access of the community. The White Paper recognized that, if the problems of congestion and pollution were to be tackled, a new approach was needed. This new approach aimed to increase personal choice by improving alternatives, thus securing mobility that would be sustainable in the long term. Put simply, the policies required less use of cars and more use



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of alternative means—principally, public transport, cycling and walking. The White Paper also recognized that, while central government could set the framework, much of the responsibility for implementation would rest with local authorities.

8. The White Paper and the subsequent daughter documents set out in some detail the tools which the Government expected local authorities to deploy in their development of local strategies to achieve sustainable, integrated transport in their areas. A cynic might observe that local authorities had developed most of the tools suggested, although some legislative back-up has been promised to enhance the effectiveness of the various policy tools. Specifically, the Transport Bills currently being considered by Westminster and Holyrood include powers for local authorities to enforce quality bus partnerships and introduce congestion charging and workplace parking levies.

9. The White Paper also signalled a move away from transport policies and programmes (TPPs) to local transport plans (LTPs) (local transport strategies in Scotland) to provide a mechanism for local authorities to plan over a longer time-scale and set up a monitoring (best value?) virtuous circle. The new system leaves local authorities free to determine their priorities within an overall allocation for transport spending. However, the size of the allocation will (in part at least) be influenced by the extent to which the local authority's strategy adheres to government guidelines.

Local transport plans and best value

10. The introduction of LTPs is a central part of the Government's strategy for developing an integrated transport system. In his foreword to the LTP guidance document,³ John Reid, the then Transport Minister, promised to allocate funds on the 'strength of the strategy'. Indeed, there is some evidence in the awards announcement of this being the case.⁴ The guidance also suggested that: 'LTPs will be a key part of the process by which authorities meet their duty of best value. LTPs, along with the Best Value Fundamental Performance Reviews, will feed into best value Local Performance Plans.' And, in keeping with that, the guidance also laid great emphasis on the need to involve the public, so that, in best value terms, the local transport strategy would reflect what people want.

11. There is, of course, a potential conflict in these two strands of advice. In effect, the Government is saying to local authorities 'you must ensure you are giving people what they want, as long as it is in line with our guidance'. The conflict is one that many local authority transport planners will be familiar with and, if we are honest, one that we as individuals weigh up every time we make travel decisions. We

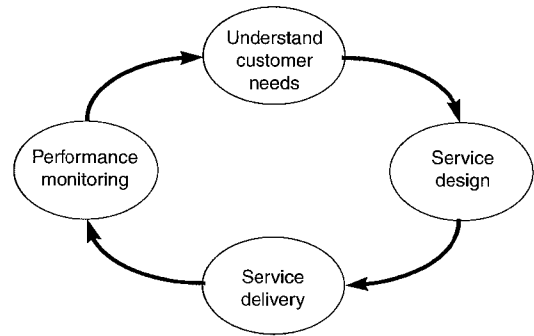


Fig. 1. A best value virtuous circle

know that, if we are to be socially responsible, a number of the trips we make day in day out could be made just as well by other means. The trouble is we find all sorts of excuses to 'justify' to ourselves why we really need our car for that particular trip.

12. The same sort of perverse logic applies in transport planning consultation exercises. Discuss the general issues with Joe Public and they will usually sign up to the concept of using cars less and other modes more. The problem arises, of course, when we get to the detail and to the implementation of the programme of works to achieve these objectives, be it the reallocation of road space or the imposition of parking or congestion charges. It is then that we get the 'Oh, you meant *my* car' reaction. John Prescott probably began to appreciate fully the difficulty that he faces in bridging the gap between strategy and implementation, as soon as the former Shadow Environment, Transport and the Regions Secretary, John Redwood, saw the political opportunity of becoming the 'motorists' friend' and branded the Secretary of State as 'anti-car'.

Proving best value for the local authority transportation service

13. At the same time as developing an LTP that, for the purposes of this paper, will equate to the transportation service, all local authorities are required to report on their performance under the best value regime. For England and Wales, the requirements are published in a joint guidance document⁵ issued by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) and the Audit Commission. It provides a set of PIs which is designed to give 'a rounded view of performance, reflecting as far as possible service users' experience of service delivery (outputs and outcomes) rather than the resources devoted to them (inputs)'. These PIs were issued in draft form in September 1999 and, following consultation, issued in their final form in December 1999. In general, the service delivery PIs for each service area fall into five dimensions:

- (a) strategic objectives (what the service seeks to achieve)

Table 1. Transport best value PIs

Strategic objectives	No PI
Cost/efficiency	Cost of highway maintenance/100 km Cost/passenger journey (subsidized services) Average cost of street-light maintenance
Service delivery outcomes	Condition of roads Percentage of street-lights working Road safety Total bus miles Total bus passengers
Quality	Percentage of users satisfied with passenger transport information Percentage of users satisfied with bus services
Fair access	Speed of response to reports of damage to roads and pavements

- (b) cost/efficiency (the unit cost of providing outputs)
- (c) service delivery outcomes (how well the service achieves the strategic objectives)
- (d) quality (what users think of the service)
- (e) fair access (ease and equality of access to services).

14. Curiously, in the consultation draft, the set of PIs for transport had, as a strategic objective, a local transport plan (the target being to have one!). Understandably, many local authorities thought this was too simplistic and it has disappeared from the final document. The PIs we are left with (Table 1) are, at best, patchy and certainly do not provide a comprehensive overview of whether the local authority is delivering the transportation service that people want—at a price they are prepared to pay.

15. Given the lack of comprehensive PIs, coupled with the potential contradiction between national policy and local aspirations, local authorities have effectively been left to resolve the problems themselves. The challenges confronting local authorities are

- (a) how to comprehensively measure the performance of their transportation service
- (b) how to persuade their communities that an integrated and sustainable transport strategy is what they want.

Measuring performance

16. The Audit Commission in its *Code of Audit Practice*,⁶ defines economy, efficiency and effectiveness as follows.

- (a) *Economy*. Acquiring human and material resources of the appropriate quality and quantity at the lowest cost.
- (b) *Efficiency*. Producing the maximum output for any given set of resource inputs or using the minimum inputs for the required quantity and quality of service provided.
- (c) *Effectiveness*. Having the organization meet the citizens' requirements and having a

programme or activity achieve its established goals or intended aims.

17. Considering the last definition, it follows that an authority cannot possibly prove that it has delivered its service effectively unless it has a clear idea of what its citizens want. That can only be achieved through a thorough consultation process.

18. So how do the best value PIs equate to the three Es? The definition of economy, efficiency and effectiveness is based very firmly on inputs, outputs and outcomes. Within a best value process, assuming that we assemble our resources (people, equipment and materials) economically, we then have to use these resources efficiently to produce the outputs of the transport service. These outputs, I would suggest, are

- (a) the road network—its management, maintenance and enhancement
- (b) the public transport network—its management, maintenance and enhancement
- (c) the cycle network—its management, maintenance and enhancement
- (d) the pedestrian infrastructure—its management, maintenance and enhancement

and so on.

19. The outcomes are the things that happen as a result of us providing those outputs. The desired outcomes are the objectives we include in our local transport plans—which will, in all probability, include targets. Typically, if the LTP is adhering to Government guidelines, objectives will include

- (a) reduction in congestion
- (b) reductions in accidents
- (c) change in modal split (fewer cars, more public transport passengers, cyclists and pedestrians)
- (d) improved air quality.

20. Therefore, assuming these objectives have the community's approval, achievement of them would demonstrate the effectiveness of the

council's transportation service. If, at the same time, through other PIs, the council is able demonstrate that its costs for providing the service are economic and efficient, the council will be well on the way to proving best value. It appears to me that most of the PIs suggested by the DETR and the Audit Commission (Table 1) are outputs rather than outcomes. The exception is the one dealing with road safety.

21. The decision to remove the PI—to have an LTP—was clearly sensible. However, not to have a strategic indicator (which sets out what the service is intended to achieve) is an omission. Since the LTP requires each council to set out its proposals for transportation in its area, it is by definition setting out the strategic indicators in this area of council activity. Councils are required to consult on the LTP and it is therefore reasonable to assume that these documents will (in time) reflect what the community wants. Consequently, if the LTP were to encompass

- (a) a statement of the council's strategic objectives for transportation (as agreed through consultation)
- (b) a report on the extent to which these (or previous objectives) have been achieved
- (c) a report on the council's performance against economy and efficiency measures, such as those included in the performance indicator guidance
- (d) a programme for meeting its strategic objectives
- (e) a programme for improving the economy and efficiency of the service

then a best value virtuous circle process would be established.

22. Considering how we measure the performance against the strategic objectives, it is worth noting that there is plenty of experience within the transportation planning profession of evaluating the effectiveness of transport proposals: the new approach to appraisal (NATA) represents the current state of the art. What we have not been particularly good at is continuing round the virtuous circle to check whether the project had the expected effects. (Was it as effective as predicted?) How then should we evaluate and monitor the effectiveness of transport strategies? Clearly, whatever method is chosen needs to be reasonably simple, comprehensible to the general public and also should not be too demanding in terms of data collection.

23. One possible method has previously been suggested in connection with the evaluation of package bids. The former Department of Transport sponsored research into the development of a framework for evaluating and monitoring the effectiveness of package bid proposals. The resulting report⁷ recommended causal chain analysis. This approach illustrates

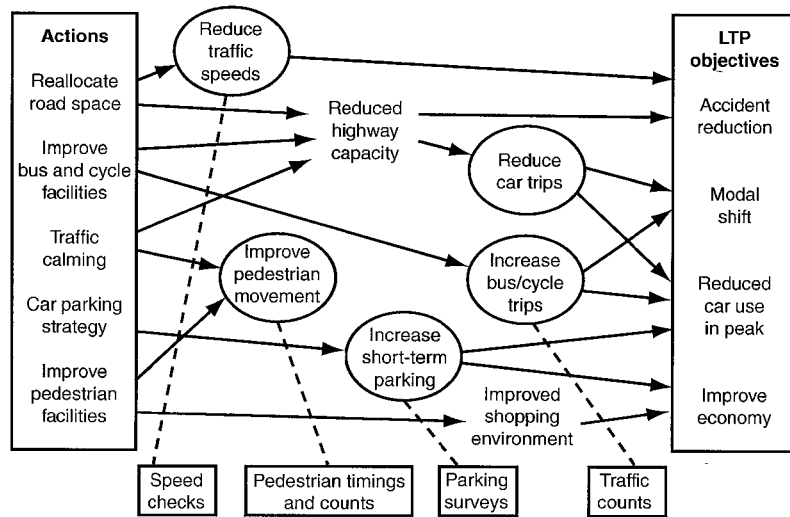


Fig. 2. Causal chain diagram for town centre enhancements

how the various schemes or measures within a package are linked to the desired outcome to fulfil the objectives of the package. Fig. 2 gives an example of causal chain analysis for a town centre enhancement programme. It would of course be possible to apply this technique at different levels

- (a) at a strategic (or local authority) level to demonstrate the way in which the different elements of the council's strategy work together to achieve its objectives
- (b) at an individual programme level (such as town centre enhancements).

24. The advantage of this technique is that while it will often take some time for achievement of the objectives to become apparent, it also identifies the 'stepping stones' on the way to the achievement of objectives and allows monitoring of these as a proxy for the main objective.

Squaring the virtuous circle

25. Having shown how we can, perhaps, demonstrate the effectiveness of the transportation strategy in terms of how well it achieves its objectives, we still need to demonstrate (if we want to prove best value) that the strategy accords with what local people want. Squaring perceived differences between national policy and local aspirations may be, in fact, central to the best value philosophy. It would be wrong to think that because there are tensions between national and local perceptions of 'what the people want' one of the parties has got it wrong. As I said earlier, most of us would willingly sign up to the basic concept of a sustainable transport strategy: the problem is that the devil is in the detail. However, as transportation planners, we should be used by now to the fickleness of our customers, who through their increasing use of their vehicles signal the need for more road space and, when we try to provide

it, go underground with Swampy to block it. Now that we have accepted that to predict and provide is self-defeating, are they changing their tune? Part of the problem is, I think, that none of us like to be told what to do. We like it even less when it is 'them', 'the planners', 'the faceless bureaucrats at the town hall'. That is where best value comes in. Applied properly, best value implies consultation/involvement throughout the fundamental service review and during implementation and in the follow-up. If we apply this philosophy to transportation services, we need to recognize that we probably shape our transportation service on at least three different levels

- (a) strategic (structure plan level)
- (b) area (local plan level)
- (c) scheme.

26. And, overlaid on this are the national and regional policy levels. I have argued earlier that committing at a strategic level to the concept of accepting limits on our use of the car is relatively easy; committing to real restrictions is much more difficult, particularly when someone else is telling you. It does, however, become easier if it is your idea. So, involving communities in the development of the solution—including any restriction—may be the key to success. There is significant experience now of consultation techniques such as 'planning for real' where communities have been fully involved in the development of 'their' scheme which have included the acceptance of restrictions.

27. One powerful example of this was highlighted in the integrated transport White Paper.² This recognized the success in Hertfordshire of the 'walking bus' as one of a number of measures developed to tackle the apparently intractable problem of 'the school run'. This highly successful experiment is being replicated across the country, but it is important to realize that what is being replicated is not particularly the solution but the approach. That approach has to involve the community in identifying and recognizing the nature of the problems, as well as developing solutions to which they will commit.

28. The development of these community solutions can, however, feed back up the chain into the area-wide and strategic policy making levels. It is no accident that the White Paper setting out national policy leant heavily on practical policy initiatives developed at the local level. This implies, I believe, that the best value virtuous circle for transportation is in fact a series of overlaid circles. The high-level circle sets the context for the next level down, but equally the experience of delivering service at the lower level not only informs future delivery of the service at that level, it also feeds back into the next cycle of higher level circles.

Scheme design and implementation will become easier if the community has been involved in setting the context for the scheme in the higher level planning and is also involved in the final design. Equally, development of acceptable schemes will influence strategic policy-making.

29. The implications of all this are that far more effort needs to be put into the consultation and planning stages of our transport strategies and programmes and that we, as engineers, must become consultants to the community, interpreting its wishes and not handing down solutions. Sir John Harvey-Jones⁸ once said

Everything I have learnt teaches me that it is only when you work with rather than against people that achievement and lasting success is possible. It is this belief that I am trying to express, for it is an art which is applicable to any enterprise of any size in any area of life's activities.

The day of the municipal engineer who knew best and dispensed his solutions to a grateful community is long past. We need to work with our communities and use our skills to facilitate solutions which they want.

Conclusions

30. Current government advice on LTPs and best value PIs displays a lack of joined-up thinking in Government. Best value requires local authorities to demonstrate that they are delivering services economically, efficiently and effectively. Government policy requires local authorities to develop transport strategies that will deliver an integrated and sustainable transport system. However, in developing its best value PIs it has failed to provide true measures of effectiveness for a council's transport strategy. At the same time it seems to have overlooked the opportunity, within the LTP process, to do just that.

31. One way of dealing with this omission is to develop the LTP process as the vehicle for demonstrating best value. Certainly LTPs should be setting out their programmes for developing an integrated transport system which matches the aspirations of its area. In later submissions they will need to report on the success or otherwise of those programmes (thereby demonstrating effectiveness or not). It would no bad thing if, at the same time, the document was reporting on the unit costs of implementing these programmes (in other words, how economically and efficiently the programmes had been implemented). Thus the LTP could incorporate the local performance plan for transportation.

32. At the same time, genuine consultative processes at community level can help to refine and develop transport policy thinking at regional and national level.

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