

**DINNER/DISCUSSION SUMMARY**

**Urban Congestion Management**

Held at The Royal Society on Wednesday 18<sup>th</sup> June 2003

Sponsored by  
**Department for Transport**

**In the Chair: The Earl of Selborne FRS**

**Speakers: Mr Malcolm Murray-Clark**

Director, Congestion Charging, Transport for London

**Mr Mike Talbot**

Head, Traffic Management Division, Department for Transport

**Mr Jerry England**

Director of Water Operations, Thames Water

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MR. MURRAY-CLARK outlined the genesis of the London Congestion charge. It stemmed from the ROCOL Report of 2000 and was empowered under the London and Transport legislation of 1999 and 2000 which was based on substantial research and wide consultation. It was part of a wider strategy embracing public transport, (principally buses) improvements, traffic management and parking. The public transport improvements came into force before the charge was introduced, in order to get public acceptance. The charge covered only a small area of central London, because that was where congestion was worse. Its success depended upon rigorous enforcement, continuous monitoring (of social and economic as well as transport effects), and limiting the number of exemptions. The object was to reduce congestion, and the £5 charge was set in order to achieve a 10 to 15 % reduction of traffic. In fact, the actual impact has been to reduce the number of vehicles by 20% (largely cars), reduce traffic by 16%, raise average speed from 13km/hr to 17km/hr, and reduce congestion by 32%. Enforcement has been successful – 250,000 penalty notices issued; 20% objected, but only 2% went to appeal. The reasons for success were political commitment; clear policy objective (congestion not environment); integrated team working; strong project management; early delivery of public transport improvement; wide consultation, information and publicity. We now needed to look at possible extension, and the use of more sophisticated technology.

MR. MIKE TALBOT outlined the Department of Transport's national policy objectives – to reduce congestion, improve accessibility, reduce casualties, improve the environment and assist the national economy. These aims were set out in the 1998 White Paper, embodied in the 10-year plan and funded by increased allocations. But these objectives could only be met by the Department working through local authorities, who controlled 96% of the road network. While there had to be a national framework, delivery

must be local, through local transport plans. The target was to reduce urban congestion to below 2000 levels by 2010. At present congestion was increasing in all urban areas, both because the capacity of the network was being degraded by e.g. utility and repair works, and because of increased demand from a larger population with more cars and a mobile lifestyle. Local transport plans needed to improve capacity (getting works done and tackling accidents more quickly); co-ordinate systems and proposals through a traffic manager; ensure better enforcement of parking and lane usage; improve technology, and reduce demand (by land use planning which discouraged car travel; improving public transport; improving infrastructure; a vigorous parking strategy; congestion charging and "soft measures" such as education and information) The Department was working with local authorities to develop technology to monitor performance, control traffic, and execute works more quickly. It was seeking to make it easier to use alternatives to the car, and provide better facilities for pedestrians and cyclists. But technology was not enough: each town was different and needed different solutions to its congestion problems; hence the need for local transport plans suited to the town concerned.

MR. JERRY ENGLAND outlined the problems that Thames Water had in helping to reduce congestion on London's roads. History had laid 100,000 miles of water pipes, largely under London's roads. The task of renewing and repairing them was immense (half the mains were over 100 years old and leakage was an unacceptable 30%), could not be avoided without damaging a vital service, and continuous. A growing population and water usage and difficult ground conditions did not help. There was no way out of having to face a long-term prospect of utility street works, which would be bound to add to congestion. In dealing with these works the company was doing all it could to meet concerns. First it consulted widely on its programme for works with regulatory authorities and others (but it had to be recognized that there were

emergencies for which you could not plan); second it worked hard to reduce the time spent on any particular job (95% of the 80,000 streetworks each year were done in 3.5 hours or under – and, apart from anything else, streetworks were expensive for the company) and, third, it was actively exploring new technology, such as directional drilling and “no dig” technologies, and the use of flexible working practices. Ideas such as lane rental and full width restoration were all very well, but it all added to the cost to the customer, and would not necessarily reduce the time and number of streetworks.

The discussion fell into two parts: one devoted to questioning the working of the London charging scheme; the other to considering wider problems of car usage and the Department’s strategy.

On the London scheme, participants queried the basis for setting the charge at £5, and wondered whether it was right to base the scheme solely on reducing congestion, without looking at wider environmental issues, such as air quality. Was £5 set because it was thought that a bigger charge would cause a riot, or because there was objective evidence to indicate that that was the figure that would produce the 10 to 15 % reduction sought? And why, in any case, should the reduction be set at 10 to 15% and not higher or lower? The result of the charge and the exemptions seemed to be that central London was now full of white vans, while residents of the surrounding areas were severely hampered – in particular by lorries parking in residential areas with inadequate enforcement of parking restrictions. Were the bus improvements really making a difference, and, in particular, were “bendy buses” which took up so much road space, a good idea? Why was the funding for improving buses linked to revenue from the charge; should not that investment be made on its own merits? Would it not have been sensible to wait until a more sophisticated technology had been developed, which could react more sensitively to individual and commercial needs? The answer to many of these points lay in the political decision, supported by many organisations, that something needed to be done about central London congestion “now”: to do nothing risked ever greater public frustration and economic loss. To do something “now” meant taking a firm decision to concentrate on one objective – reducing congestion – in spite of the temptation to crowd in all sorts of other objectives – and using technology which could be relied upon to work within the short period allowed for implementation. If the system used had not been installed, this evening’s session would be discussing, not the charge, but the theory behind congestion charging. The public transport improvements had been welcomed by travellers, and bus usage had notably increased (and “bendy buses” reduced boarding time and improved on time keeping) and it was wrong to assume that investment in public transport was limited by receipts from the charge – although it was important for the public to feel that the charge was being used for transport purposes.

On the broader issues, a number of participants were concerned by what appeared to be a lack of radical thinking and focus in the Department’s strategy. A 10 year plan was all very well, but transport strategy needed to look much further ahead than that. It needed to think through the demographic changes that were occurring, geographic dispersal of employment and population, different modes of working, the increasing number of cars that are pouring onto roads and, crucially, the overall economic impact of what was being done or proposed. If the central focus of the strategy was to provide for the “good life”, and then it must be clearer about what that meant – in the eyes of many people it was, still, unconstrained mobility; but in the eyes of many others it was realising environmental and other goals. You could not have it all ways. But, perhaps, the core objective was to encourage economic growth by targeting transport improvements which would give value for money, and erecting proper economic signals to regulate transport usage. At present it was unclear how value for money was judged, and how assessments balanced economic growth against environmental and other objectives. But speakers said that two things were clear – there must be a comprehensive scheme for road pricing which could maximize the capacity of the network and increase individual choice, and there must be clear criteria laid down for extending and creating charging zones. It was good that the Secretary of State was launching a discussion on road pricing, but he should not wait until the inevitably divergent responses were in; he should start urgent work now on developing the technology which would be flexible enough to enable people to make choices about travel, control traffic behaviour and raise revenue in a way which related to transport costs. Charging lorries on a mileage basis was a start, but it would be unwisely optimistic to think that the Treasury would ever willingly relinquish fuel tax, and they would certainly (in the view of some participants, rightly) oppose any hypothecation of road revenue, however, appealing that might be to road users. He should follow his strategy of letting local authorities do what they think necessary on the basis of national criteria. If Bristol could meet published criteria then it should be able to go ahead with a charging scheme if it wants (similarly, if Durham wants to charge more than £2 for its scheme – perhaps to improve on its 98% reduction of traffic – then it should be able to do so – not that it does - without approval from Whitehall). A major problem, however, lies behind the department’s policy of local transport planning – the reliance by local authorities on central government funding. Until that can be reduced and local authorities given more freedom to raise and spend their own revenues, the Department will not be able to relinquish its detailed approval and monitoring role.

Sir Geoffrey Chipperfield KCB