

TACKLING SOCIAL EXCLUSION IN TRANSPORT: Principles into Practice?

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Introduction

Since 1997, the UK Government has stressed its determination to combat the underlying factors that reinforce 'social exclusion'. In recent times, policy attention has turned to the shortcomings of transport and urban design that make it hard for people to reach places that the State considers critical to their life-chances, especially access to jobs, health care, education and food shops (Social Exclusion Unit 2003). For example, improvements to accessibility are acknowledged as a key element of social regeneration for residents in New Deal for Communities areas (DETR/TRaC 2000). Hitherto, no single agency has co-ordinated action to tackle such problems. Soon, however, Local Transport Authorities will be responsible for 'Accessibility Planning'. In each area, they will be required to identify accessibility needs, and the resources available to respond to the problems that are thus identified. They will also be encouraged to establish partnerships with the other local agencies as a first step that will lead to Action Plans and implementation (Department for Transport 2004).

There are, however, concerns that these important principles will be difficult to put into practice. Despite changes in planning guidelines, car-orientated land use patterns prevail. Over the past two decades, urban transport in the UK has been transformed by Neo-liberal policies of central government. Most 'public' transport is delivered by private operators that are subject to market forces and commercial pressures. Furthermore, practitioners lack accurate, reliable tools: to identify those who experience transport-related exclusion; to understand the importance of access and mobility in their life-worlds; to evaluate the social impact of initiatives. *Accessibility and User Needs in Transport for Sustainable Urban Environments* (AUNT-SUE) is a major new research project funded by the Engineering and Physical Science Research Council (£0.9 million 2004-7) that will investigate and address these issues.

The aim of the research programme is to improve understanding of the perceptions and motivations of people who experience transport-related exclusion. Better knowledge and empathy will then be incorporated into a 'toolkit' to support those working to make the infrastructure of urban transport and public spaces more inclusive (view www.aunt-sue.org.uk). The study has included semi-structured, in-depth interviews carried out by the author with senior transport planners in four Local Transport Authorities to ascertain their perceptions of the problems and their views on how they should be tackled. This short paper considers the reasons why well intentioned, high-level policies are compromised and fail at 'street level', and the views of practitioners in four Local Transport

Authorities as to the key drivers and 'blockers' of initiatives in their areas. It assesses the prospects for transport planners and providers to develop a shared vision and address the problems that currently exclude people, from the macro-level of regional and urban transport systems down to the micro-level of vehicles, supporting infrastructure and street furniture design.

Conceptualising Social Exclusion and the Significance of Accessibility

The concept of *social inclusion* is closely associated with the ideals that inspired the New Labour Government's vision of an integrated transport system that would be fairer and 'Better for Everyone' (DETR 1998). High on this agenda was the need to combat the underlying factors that prevent or deter people from participating in activities that are considered to be 'normal' for a citizen of the 'mainstream' society in which they live. Thus, according to Giddens (1998: 104):

'Exclusion is not about graduations of inequality, but about the mechanisms that detach people from the social mainstream.'

Burchardt *et al.* (1999) also emphasise the relational and normative features of the concept:

'An individual is socially excluded if a) he or she is geographically resident in a society and b) he or she does not participate in the normal activities of citizens in that society.'

However, this definition does not make clear the geographical scale of 'society'. Does it refer to a nation state, a city-region or smaller area? Furthermore, spatial definitions of belonging may be of limited value; it may be more meaningful to consider the 'society' with which an individual identifies.

Exclusion is conceptualised as a *process* of detachment that may lead to increasing isolation and alienation, reinforcing disadvantage. Describing the growing divisions of British society in the 1980s and 1990s, Walker and Walker (1997) highlight:

'a dynamic process of being shut out, fully or partially, from any of the social, economic, political and cultural systems which determine the social integration of a person in society'.

This implies that the processes that exclude people result from an imbalance of power: a perspective that underlines the need to identify and understand the *relational* factors between the powerful and the powerless. The 'mechanisms' of exclusion may result in social disengagement and exacerbate the problems of disadvantage. Nevertheless, there is a lack of explanatory theory and it is hard to explain why residents of a particular area experience very high levels of unemployment, crime and anti-social behaviour, poor health

and low achievement in education, while people living in another area with comparable social, economic and environmental characteristics do not. There is increasing awareness that problems with transport and the location of key services reinforce isolation and exclusion of individuals, social groups and whole neighbourhoods (SEU 2003). However, it is hard to establish the extent to which inadequacies of transport systems and urban design are causal factors (DETR/TRaC 2000).

Summarising workshop discussion on 'travel chances and social exclusion' at the annual conference (Geneva 2003) of the International Association of Travel Behaviour Research, Lyons (2003: 340) offers three interpretations of what might constitute social exclusion. Essentially, these are based on the experiences, needs and wants of those who may be regarded - and regard themselves - in various ways cut off from the social mainstream:

- "experiencing public service failure" (acknowledging the significance of structural failure in public intervention and how this may impact on individuals and communities);
- "the discrepancy between what you can do and what you want to do" (a social construct that is essentially the viewpoint of those who experience exclusion);
- "a spectrum of deprivation" (a recognition of the inadequacy of binary measures of inclusion/exclusion, and hence the need to develop benchmarks beyond which the level of deprivation is unacceptable).

The search for explanation of travel behaviour may therefore suggest a paradigm shift away from preoccupation with the supply or *availability* of transport towards *accessibility*-based analysis. Central to this concern is the need to comprehend people's aspirations towards and resources for social participation, and how these may govern their daily patterns of activity. As Lyons argues (*ibid*), this raises important questions concerning what parameters should be used as proxies for exclusion, and thus what data to collect. Increasing recognition is given to quality of access, measurement of which must somehow be developed through better knowledge and understanding of people's perceptions, experiences and motivations.

As yet, the principles of social inclusion are difficult to put into practice. As Hine and Mitchell (2001) conclude, the difficulties of defining the fundamental concepts of mobility, access and accessibility pose problems for their operationalisation. Furthermore, effective delivery of initiatives is dependent on the willing co-operation of diverse agencies in the public, private and third sector. With reference to planning and urban governance, Healey (1997:285) has emphasised the potential of 'collaborative strategy-making processes' for inclusive institutional capacity building, especially for Local Authorities. This, she argues, must be based upon the "grass roots" of the real concerns of specific stakeholders as they react with each other in a particular place and time. Implementation will thus require re-engagement, participation and consensus

building: informal processes as well as formal co-ordination procedures.

From Policy Intent to Implementation of Inclusive Transport and Urban Design

The principles that have influenced government thinking on social exclusion must now be incorporated in the policies and practices of Local Transport Authorities. Over the next five years, the focus will shift from national strategy to the meso-level of transport serving city regions and sub-regions, especially because:

- a) Many Local Transport Authorities are now carrying out programmes that explicitly address social exclusion and the need to improve accessibility for disadvantaged groups (as expressed in Local Transport Plans). This means that the practitioners responsible for implementation will require conceptual definitions of social exclusion/ inclusion to be *operationalised* according to the principle of 'fitness for purpose'. Most fundamentally, there is a need to *identify the people who experience exclusion and where they are located* so that resources can be targeted and appropriate action taken.
- b) There is now an urgent need for techniques that will enable Authorities to *prove that their programmes will have a positive effect on reducing social exclusion*. This will soon become a universal imperative, as an accessibility strategy - including an audit of needs and resources - will become a core component in the next round of Local Transport Plans (2006/07 to 2010/11). Public expenditure on major schemes, such a light rail that are justified with reference to their role in reducing exclusion will also need to 'prove it' to central Government. This highlights the need for reliable measurement of the benefits to those who experience social exclusion identified in a).
- c) If exclusion is the result of marginalisation of the powerless by the powerful, implementation of the inclusion agenda highlights the need for new, empowering structures of urban governance (Atkinson 2003). Implementation of programmes and schemes described in b) *will require continuing political will, and hence wide public support*, not only from those who are disadvantaged, but also from those who are transport-affluent. And, as Hodgson and Turner (2003: 271-2) conclude, *facilitation of more inclusive user participation in the processes that determine the operation and management of transport systems* will be a significant challenge; the transport profession will require 'new rules, practices and tools'.

In order to assess the significance of these issues and problems for Local Transport Authorities, interviews were conducted with senior officers in four Authorities: Transport for London (TfL), LB Tower Hamlets; Bristol City Council; Brighton and Hove City Council. Semi-structured interviews of approximately 90 minutes were conducted informally in Council offices to allow respondents to define the points that they considered to be of greatest importance. Open-ended questions were posed, including:

Who are the key drivers of progress and who are the 'blockers' of initiatives to make urban transport more accessible to 'excluded' social groups?

Who are the Drivers and Blockers of Change?

The concept of social exclusion has highlighted the structures, agencies and complex processes that may combine to reinforce the involuntary isolation of those who already experience disadvantage, and constrain their ability to participate in 'normal' activities. The study confirmed that all four Local Transport Authorities have a strong commitment to the social inclusion agenda. Although there are no definitive guidelines to identify the target groups who might experience transport-related exclusion, there seemed to be a consensus that these may include: older people; young adults; parents with young children; disabled people; black and ethnic minorities; the unemployed and low paid, especially shift workers. There was also a rising awareness and concern for those whose needs might not be so apparent, in particular: people with learning difficulties; and others who experience fear of assault and harassment, claustrophobia or anxiety in crowds.

The four Local Authorities have already put into place initiatives to make transport environments and infrastructure more accessible. Such good practice can be built upon and may offer transferable solutions. However, the interviews also suggested that even where the political will is strong, the powers and resources available to them are somewhat limited. They also underlined the need to ensure that the necessary 'joined up thinking' espoused in Accessibility Planning can be put into practice. There were indications that the secondary effects of interventions with other public policy objectives, such as to stimulate the local economy or to increase low cost accommodation could have unforeseen consequences for the access and mobility. Effective co-ordination by Local Transport Authorities will require the collaboration of the 'other agencies': powerful stakeholders with diverse objectives whose support must be enlisted.

Current commitment may be strong, both at national and at local level. Nevertheless, anxieties were expressed with regard to an uncertain political and economic climate over the next five years, with the possibility of a 'backlash' against programmes that espoused social justice objectives. With the notable exception of compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, much depends on the use of discretionary powers and public expenditure that may be cut back or re-allocated. Without robust methodologies to identify the beneficiaries and evaluate outcomes, proposals justified with reference to 'social inclusion benefits' may be more difficult to defend. Transport for London (TfL) stressed the role of London's Mayor (to whom their organisation is accountable) and, in particular, the personal commitment of the current Mayor Ken Livingston to the broader social inclusion agenda.

TfL also stressed the influence of the Treasury and the Chancellor. Nationally, *Transport 2010* (DETR 2000) proposed to make available capital grants that will support up to 25 light rail schemes over the decade. In London, the example of Croydon Tramlink suggests that light rail can benefit people using wheelchairs and others with impaired mobility, providing it is integrated with other transport and the surrounding street environment is made equally accessible (Mayor of

London 2001: 147-8). There is also evidence that Tramlink has helped improve access to employment and key services in areas such as New Addington. However, national priorities have changed, and a number of light rail proposals now have an uncertain future. TfL will have to work hard to convince the Treasury of the case for other proposals such as the West London Tram (Uxbridge-Shepherd's Bush), especially if opposed by local pressure groups.

As the first-tier transport authority responsible for the whole of the London Region, TfL are themselves important gatekeepers through the annual settlement of funding allocated to the second-tier Boroughs. LB Tower Hamlets was acknowledged as an example of a Borough that was highly committed and which had worked closely with TfL, but others were less enthusiastic:

"We give guidance but we do not force a bid and in one or two cases Boroughs are choosing not to engage with TfL programmes because they do not see it as a priority for their Borough. The statistics for those Boroughs may suggest perhaps that this is not the right decision for them to make because of the number of people that may be considered socially excluded."

The process of bidding for Government or European Commission funding for transport projects with explicit inclusion objectives had been an important catalyst for collaboration between local stakeholders, and a notable example is Urban Bus Challenge. Bristol had successfully bid to develop projects that included remedial action addressing severance of black and ethnic minority communities by the M32 motorway in St. Paul's-Montpelier-Easton.

LB Tower Hamlets has made its policies and intentions explicit in its Strategic and Community Plans. These set out the major themes and explain how the vision will be delivered. Targets are set and overall success is monitored. They also emphasised their elected Members (councillors) as key promoters of social inclusion, and considered the cabinet structure helpful in facilitating more co-ordinated action, as did Brighton and Hove and Bristol. Nevertheless, there were concerns that other interventions, in some cases, might have unintended consequences.

For example, as a Local Planning Authority, LB Tower Hamlets had negotiated section 106 agreements 'planning gain' that required developers to build 10-30% social housing in order to obtain planning permission for large private housing schemes in Docklands. Unless the area has good public transport, this may reinforce the social exclusion with regard to transport of these new residents creating isolated areas within the new expensive private housing. Another example of unintended consequences was in Bristol, where encouragement of the night economy of the city centre through nightclubs and other entertainment was expected to stimulate a demand for all-night buses that would also be available to shift workers such as hospital staff. In practice, however, crime and anti-social behaviour around bus stops, taxi ranks and three of the eight night bus routes is now a significant threat to nurses and other night-workers. Furthermore, the employment of 'Doorsafe' security staff is a significant public cost.

Significantly, the two Authorities outside the regulated TfL region identified bus companies as key agents of change: Go Ahead Group (Brighton and Hove) and First Group (Bristol). Both have near-monopolies of the commercial network and a

high proportion of tendered services. Their co-operation was therefore essential, especially with regard to routes and schedules operated, and policies with regard to fleet purchase, fares, staffing and staff training. These affected the four critical dimensions identified in DETR/TRaC (2000: 70-2):

- *Affordability*: concessionary fares are now mandatory (Transport Act 2000), but for many people on low incomes, high fares seem a significant barrier, especially in Bristol.
- *Availability*: in Brighton and Hove services are expanding in response to upward demand (about 5% per annum), but in Bristol patronage is static or in decline and services in some areas have been withdrawn due to anti-social behaviour, as discussed above;
- *Accessibility*: the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 will be an important catalyst as older buses are phased out and replaced. Both cities had relatively new fleets with fully accessible vehicles on some routes, but barrier-free mobility requires collaboration to ensure accessible streets, bus stops and interchanges;
- *Acceptability*: the quality of services can be enhanced through micro-level improvements by designers of vehicles (specifications and fleet purchase), supporting infrastructure such as Real Time Information, as well as the availability and awareness of employees (staffing and training).

The voluntary sector also plays a significant and expanding role in complementing mainstream public transport, responding to user needs not being met by the commercial network or tendered services. In the case of LB Tower Hamlets, the Council has worked closely with the Community Transport provider, and Urban Bus Challenge funding has been secured. This has enabled the development of services that are designed to reach an ethnically diverse population. Nevertheless, in other areas this may be more difficult to achieve, as Bristol emphasised:

“A problem with Community Transport [in our city] is that it has not reached certain communities, especially among ethnic minority groups, notably ethnic minority women who have low access to cars. So, needs are not addressed by community transport volunteers who are often middle class and middle aged. Their organisations tend to be run by similar like-minded people. You almost need an outreach worker”.

All the Local Transport Authorities emphasised the potential blockers of change at the micro-level of streetworks to enhance access and amenity in the public realm. In particular, it was difficult to identify and communicate and consult with residents and traders who might be affected. LB Tower Hamlets commented:

“It is quite often necessary to make minor changes, as residents and traders seldom read proposals but lobby for alterations after they have been carried out.”

Faced with similar problems, Brighton and Hove have put resources into a more pro-active approach to elicit

responses before putting small-scale projects out to tender, and consult more systematically, initially through targeted post/e-mail communications. The process is also informed by the monthly meetings of the Accessible Bus Stop Working Group, whose members include bus operators, traffic engineers, design consultants, users and user groups.

Conclusions

In the context of the UK Government's Third Way agenda, the concept of social inclusion requires approaches to urban governance that incorporate 'joined up thinking'. The deep-seated processes that exclude people from urban transport and the public realm - and therefore from participation in desired activities - are now being addressed, and at the level of city-regions transport planners play a key role. The Government expects Accessibility Planning to provide an effective structure and an important catalyst for further change (SEU 2003). As explained in the Department for Transport's guidance (DfT 2004), all Local Planning Authorities will identify and analyse accessibility problems, and establish 'strategic partnerships' around specific themes. The process will then lead to the formulation of more detailed 'action plans'. Transport planners will thus facilitate and monitor implementation of accessibility strategies and action plans in partnership with transport providers of all modes, as well as a very wide range of key stakeholders from other sectors, especially to improve access to 'the services with the greatest impact on life opportunities - jobs, health care, learning and food shops' (*ibid*: 1). These agencies will be critical to initiatives for improving access and personal mobility for areas, groups and individuals that are considered 'excluded', as discussed above.

For the past two decades, transport in the UK has been subjected to market forces, and is largely delivered by commercial or not-for-profit organisations. The delivery of urban transport systems is thus beyond the direct influence of Local Transport Authorities, although exceptions include London Underground, contracted bus services, Quality Partnerships in deregulated areas. And, even in these cases, implementation of corporate policies to promote inclusion at 'street level' can be far from straightforward. Implementation of the inclusive solutions will require a collaborative approach by transport providers, as well as non-transport agencies:

- 'horizontal' collaboration between diverse interests that influence and shape transport and the public realm in each locality;
- 'vertical' collaboration between designers and operators of the elements of transport systems: vehicles, ways and terminals from the macro-level of city-regions down to the design and positioning of micro-components such as street furniture.

An even greater challenge will be the development of effective structures and practices to involve individuals and socially excluded 'communities' that may be spatially and/or identity-based. As Hodgson and Turner (2003: 265) rightly argue, the very idea of social inclusion implies empowerment and involvement of 'socially excluded' people in interventions to reduce their isolation from desired activities. With reference to land use planning, the idea of facilitating social action and meaningful dialogue between 'expert', technocratic ways of 'knowing', and the life-worlds of people's everyday lives has been termed 'communicative' or 'collaborative

planning' (Forester 1989, Healey 1997). As yet, however, the theory has seldom been put into practice (Allmendinger 2001), and its application to planning for socially inclusive transport and public spaces in city-regions is an important theme that will be addressed by the research team of AUNT-SUE.

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