

JOIN THE DOTS

Nigel Harris looks at current developments in transport and explains why now, more than ever, destinations need an integrated access strategy.

With economic growth at consistent and reasonable levels, developers are feeling able to invest, whether in greenfield or brownfield sites. Commercially funded regeneration is being complemented by the funnelling of Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) funds into depressed areas. Furthermore, Lottery funding has also been made available to development projects, some of them significant, such as Millennium Point, now taking shape in Birmingham's Eastside district.

At the same time, guidance from the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) is encouraging planning authorities to support a modal shift away from the private car. Documents such as PPG Note 13 set out the detail, to be achieved through a range of measures including both sticks (such as restrictions on car-parking space) and carrots (the improvement of public transport services, for example). Discussions on road pricing in congested urban areas continue, with the government now having received submissions from local authorities prepared to act as test-beds.

Yet somehow the link between development and transport policies is not being made. This is even the case when developments become destinations in their own right, with an integrated range of employment, leisure and retail activities. Even in this electronic age, physical access is still important – it is difficult to get repeat business on the strength of your brand if customers find it difficult to get to you in the first place.

Benefits of rail

For large sites, access really can be a big issue. The potential impact on road traffic levels can cause substantial congestion problems in urban areas, or unacceptably large additional traffic volumes in rural ones. Rail transport is increasingly being considered to assist with the volumes of traffic generated by

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The MetroCentre in Gateshead is an excellent example of integrated transport planning



Sheffield's Meadowhall Centre – another destination with good transport links

large developments, even if a shuttle bus service is required to link directly into the development, as at Bluewater.

Not only can rail have a role to play in the volume market, however, but it can also have the benefit of increasing the catchment area of a development. This can be important if a development has a niche function or attraction – for instance, a leisure facility for one particular sport – because users are likely to need to come from a wide area. In London and the conurbations, a wider hinterland may be available by rail within a given time budget, as road speeds may be low due to congestion. Use of public transport from further afield may have other benefits, however, in leading to promotional possibilities at places (such as rail and bus stations) outside the circle of infrastructure, buildings and attractions at the destination itself.

But a large catchment is not only necessary geographically – it may also be necessary to attract the volume of customers needed for commercial success. This may be one of the reasons for the relatively greater success of Gateshead MetroCentre and Sheffield's Meadowhall developments (with adjacent rail stations) compared to Merry Hill (without such a facility).

Facing the facts

Whilst retailers and others concentrate on those with high disposable incomes, it is often also forgotten by decision-makers that around one-third of households do not have a car at all. Moreover, many people within car-owning households do not have access to that car at all times and/or do not want to use it for all journeys. A public transport strategy is as important, if not more important, to a major destination as its car strategy.

In addition, staff have to be able to get to work at these major developments. Even if the clientele have high disposable incomes, many of the staff will not, and the cost of providing all-day car-parking for staff is relatively high when compared to the multiple use of spaces by customers. Often, most staff will be local, and this tends to suggest a network of local bus services, which can then be used by customers as well. Detailed planning is needed

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to see whether dedicated services are preferable to adjustment of existing ones. This will depend partly on the relative volumes of development-induced and other passengers on any given route, and partly on the physical characteristics of the road layout.

Planning and development

But public transport has its issues which are not well-understood by developers. The bus mode has problems of image and reliability. On the other hand, the rail mode has problems with capacity – adding train services to the existing system may not be possible, or may only be possible with a range of operational and physical measures. For instance, development pressures alongside the London-Colchester line in Essex are leading to thinking about quadrupling the track – but at whose expense?

Moreover, given the lead times associated with physical works in the transport sector, whether in respect of the road or rail networks, early consideration of access within a destination strategy is essential. Developers must therefore begin to take access issues seriously right from the start, as they are as much an integral part of the development as the content or architectural form itself. We do not yet see a congruence in thinking between private-sector developers on the one hand, and local and central government on the other. Cars cannot be the only option. If public transport is to be included – as it must – then developers and public transport professionals must work more closely together in future, starting at the planning stage.

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