

Carbon offsetting in transport – a call for evidence

Joint submission from Transport Focus and London TravelWatch

The consultation focusses on the extent to which providing environmental information on carbon emissions could change consumer behaviour by ‘nudging’ people towards more sustainable forms of travel or to reinforce existing use of such modes. Transport Focus and London TravelWatch have a wealth of research on users’ behaviours and on what drives choice, both for existing passengers and for non-users¹.

Modal choice

Climate change is an issue that increasingly concerns passengers and users of the transport network². However, for many people choice of mode will be limited by the nature of the journeys required. For instance, in urban areas with dense public transport provision, a substantial number of journeys will have the choice of a sustainable mode such as a bus or cycling. In a rural area however, choice may be reduced to a single option of a car journey. In very pragmatic terms, providing information on the carbon emissions of a bus is immaterial if your village does not have a bus service.

Where choice does exist there are a number of factors that influence decisions. Research on rail passengers’ priorities for improvement emphasises the importance of the core product – an affordable, punctual, reliable, frequent service on which you can get a seat or, at the very least, stand in comfort³. This ‘core product’ is key in determining passenger satisfaction and also underpins the extent to which passengers ‘trust’ the railway. Bus passengers also rank punctuality as a high priority for improvement and, as with rail, getting the basics right is key to passengers trusting the service provider⁴. The quality and reliability of each mode is, therefore, a key factor in determining choice.

Governments must continue to enable and support those transport initiatives that we

¹ List of [London TravelWatch research reports](#) and [Transport Focus research reports](#)

² [Environmental issues research](#) report (2007) and [Transport User Panel: Train Power Survey](#) (2018)

³ [Rail Passengers Priorities for improvement](#) (2017)

⁴ [Trust, what to improve and using buses more](#) (2016)

know from our extensive transport user research underpins satisfaction and choice. An emphasis on measures to improve bus reliability, such as bus priority measures, will help keep current passengers satisfied and attract more passengers to bus. Making buses more reliable also keeps operating costs down which in turn makes services more financially viable. Also, reliability creates less pollution. Ensuring that bus services operate at more times when people need them – later in the day and at weekends – will also help ensure buses can be an effective, sustained choice.

Rail passenger's satisfaction mirrors reliable, on time performance. Continued government focus and investment in reliability, frequency and capacity will nudge more people into choosing rail. Bearing down on the rail industry's value for money should feed through into less pressure for continued fare rises which will make rail better value for passengers as well. Fares reform, to make rail an informed, comprehensible choice will also be important.

Road users also need and want reliable networks. So, continued investment in capacity and information will help makes roads safer, more reliable and allow smoother journeys – all good for users and the environment.

Non-users of public transport

Non-users of rail services cite cost and convenience as their main barriers to using rail⁵. When comparing car and public transport use, people typically just consider petrol and parking costs – they do not tend to factor in things like depreciation and servicing. These are seen as part of the general cost of owning a car rather than specific to the cost of making a journey. Convenience can take many forms. For some on rail it is the overall door-to-door journey time that matters, for others it's comfort, the potential to work/relax while travelling or the ability to travel when they want rather than be tied to a timetable or the ease.

Non-users of bus services tend to give similar reasons. The main barriers were again very practical; they do not run where or when people want them to, journeys take too long, and cost.

In both instances, choice, cost and convenience featured more in decision making than carbon. It is not that people do not care about the environment, but rather that, for many people, it comes after service reliability, capacity and value for money. The 'greenness' of travel is often used to validate passengers' choices but it does not necessarily guide them.

For example, in 2018 Transport Focus asked rail passengers about their views on electric or diesel-powered trains⁶. More than 90 per cent of respondents said that they tried to do what they could for the benefit of the environment and almost 80 per cent agreed that electric trains were better for the environment. However, almost half

⁵ [Barriers to travel: How to make rail more attractive to infrequent and non-users](#) (2019)

⁶ [Transport User Panel: Train Power Survey](#) (2018)

said that if the train is on time and comfortable they don't care how it is powered. Cheaper fares, greater reliability and frequency, and reduced journey times were most likely to lead to an increased use of trains. Making trains more environmentally friendly was less likely than other factors to have this impact.

Operator responsibility

There is also a sense that consumers of surface transport, as opposed to air, have an expectation that responsibility for creating sustainable travel options is the responsibility of operators and transport authorities rather than themselves as consumers. A recent tweet by London TravelWatch praising the installation of air filters at Marylebone Station had over 2,500 impressions in a few days, shows the amount of interest in this topic.

Information

Information can also have an important role in determining what mode people use. London TravelWatch and Transport Focus research shows that there is a need to inform and, at times, to educate users about the alternative choices available. A lot of travel is based on habit ('I've always done it this way...') or through a simple lack of awareness. Providing such information can make a difference in people's choices of travel.

Research by Lynn Sloman (Transport for Quality of Life) has shown the use of 'travel demand management' measures even in rural areas can increase the use of public transport, walking and cycling. This was because users often believed journeys were not possible by these means, but lacked the correct information to make an informed choice as to how to make the journey.

Transport Focus has also looked at coach travel to airports⁷. This research found that awareness of coach as an option for getting to an airport is low. Only around a quarter of people surveyed said that they thoroughly researched all options with the majority simply defaulting to their usual mode or just checking out a couple of options at best. Many people simply did not think about coach when planning their journey.

Research into the experience and views of young bus passengers also found that not knowing how the system works (including how to plan a journey and finding the right fare) is a barrier to travel. This lack of knowledge and a fear of 'getting it wrong' was also a source of anxiety⁸.

This suggests that providing good, accessible and easily understood information can make a difference in people's choices of travel. It can also be critical at the points at which users make life choice decisions about where to live, study, work, or have a change in their relationships. Where there is a choice of mode including the private

⁷ [Getting to and from the airport. Is coach an option?](#) (2019)

⁸ [Using the bus: what young people think](#) (2018)

car, without good information, users will default to using a private car. In a worked example, a new housing development, will without a restraint on private car use, and provision of a good walking, cycling and public transport environment from the outset, normally generate an environment which is highly dependent on the private car, and thereafter difficult to establish viable use of public transport, walking or cycling.

Cost

A critical part of such information is the understanding of relative costs of different modes of transport. Research for London TravelWatch on the needs of Season Ticket holders and into Value for Money, has demonstrated that many passengers, even those buying the best types of ticket for their journeys had restricted understanding of the benefits of these tickets or the additional value that came from purchasing them⁹. For example, an Annual Goldcard Season Ticket allows discounted off-peak travel on routes not covered by the Season Ticket. This has the potential to encourage modal shift from private car to public transport as part of a regular pattern of travel.

Conclusion

From the evidence available to us currently, there does not seem to be a compelling case that passengers would use carbon offsetting to make decisions about how to make a journey. Instead, the evidence for surface transport points to improving the core service provision and in providing information about journey options, particularly when 'life changing' decisions are made about where to live, work or study.

Passengers also expect operators and authorities to take the lead in promoting and changing to more sustainable means of operation e.g. electrification of rail and road vehicles fleets, better cycling and walking environments; rather than expecting the consumer to do the major work in choosing the most carbon free mode of transport.

London TravelWatch
Europoint
5-11 Lavington Street
London
SE1 0NZ
www.londontravelwatch.org.uk

Transport Focus
3rd Floor,
Fleetbank House,
2-6 Salisbury Square,
London EC4Y 8JX
www.transportfocus.org.uk

September 2019

⁹ [Annual Season Tickets: What price loyalty?](#) (2017)