

Streets for all: consumer issues in road space allocation

July 2021



Introduction

Priority one of the Government's *Decarbonising Transport: a Better, Greener Britain* plan is to accelerate modal shift to public and active transport – cycling and walking. Achieving that may require changes to how road space is allocated between different modes of transport, which must be done with care.

Transport Focus has investigated the consumer issues that should underpin decisions about the allocation of road space between different types of road user – pedestrians, cyclists and motorcyclists, and those in buses, cars, vans and lorries. We explored the issues that should be taken into account, through a series of interviews with stakeholder organisations.

Implementation of measures such as Low Traffic Neighbourhoods and reconfiguration of main urban roads

can be controversial. Changing layouts in this way affects journeys in towns and cities across England, and can make a difference – good and bad – for bus passengers and operators. The schemes have been particularly prominent in London, and we have had advice from our sister organisation London TravelWatch on the distinct context of the pressures on the city's road network.

Highway authorities should focus on the needs and wants of people and businesses making journeys on urban roads, and recognise that for some opting for a different mode will be difficult or impossible. This research identifies nine principles that should guide the approach to making changes to the allocation of road space.

Road space allocation principles

1.

Plan for the long term to align with future targets

2.

Invest in active travel and understand the needs of different user types

3.

Invest in public transport to improve availability and affordability

4.

Be realistic about the constraints on choice of mode

5.

Be flexible and responsive to different needs in scheme design

6.

Ensure clarity on new rules of the road and how measures apply

7.

Embrace all affected users in consultation before making decisions

8.

Explain the benefits and how schemes address user needs and wants

9.

Be patient - allow schemes time to settle in before assessing success

Focusing on consumers

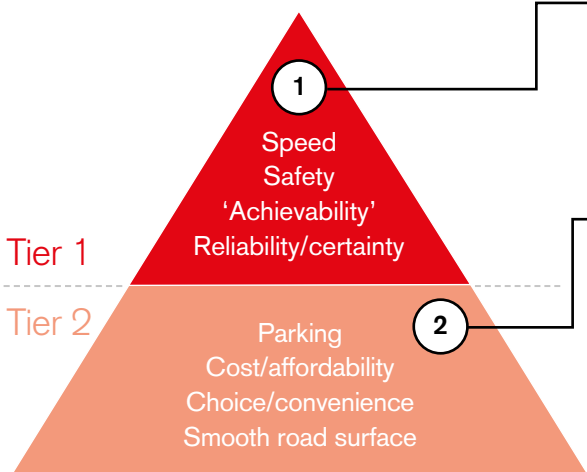
Promotion of active travel has been the main driver for recent changes in road space allocation, including as a response to social distancing requirements because of Covid-19. Debate so far has focused on the extent to which walking and cycling is actually boosted by the changes, and on changes being made without adequate consultation resulting in substandard designs.

There has been less understanding of how schemes impact on consumers and the different ways in which people and

businesses use urban roads. Our streets are the focal point of local communities and town centres, but they are also thoroughfares providing an essential service facilitating how we get from A to B. Changes to how the road system works must not undermine that service without good reason.

Regardless of the mode of travel chosen, the needs and wants of those making urban journeys can be grouped in two tiers.

Tiers of journey needs



Tier 1. Core needs and wants which are functional to a journey

Core 'functional' needs and wants, all closely linked: *speed* – making the journey in the shortest time, alongside *reliability/certainty*, and *safety*. We also identified '*achievability*', the freedom from constraints to making the journey in the first place.

Tier 2. Needs and wants

Requirements also playing a key role in getting good service from the road network: *affordability*, *smoothness of surface*, *ability to park a car, van or bike*, and *choice/convenience*.

There are other conditions which enhance the journey, but are not critical to the journey being made: *pleasant, green space, healthy, and stress-free*.

It is worth focusing on *achievability* and *choice/convenience*, as these are major factors in choosing the mode of transport used – and the success of road space allocation measures depends on users being able to change their mode. Characteristics of a particular journey, such as the need

to transport equipment, will rule out some modes being used, so the adverse impact on consumers of measures constraining other modes is heightened. And consumers will from time to time need or want to use urban roads for part of a longer journey for which active travel options may well be impractical. Other requirements may not actually prevent a journey being made, but they will increase inconvenience and stress for the road user.

The impact of measures

Road space allocation measures, by their nature, reduce the capacity and capability of the road network for some modes. Recent schemes promoting active travel have constrained movement not just by cars but also by vans and sometimes buses. They can therefore adversely affect both tiers of consumer needs and wants.

Schemes which reserve road space for bikes and pedestrians, or otherwise restrict motorised access, will boost the journey experience for some users but reduce it for others. The fact that many journeys have features which make modal shift impractical or highly inconvenient means there will be losers as well as winners amongst those using urban roads. For instance, unless special provision is made, the adverse impact on some disabled people could be particularly wide-ranging.

And the overriding needs of the emergency services for speed must also be taken into account.

Allocation of road space is not just a question of lanes for different types of movement. This research also puts the spotlight on the importance of kerb space, which is under particular pressure in dense urban areas. How the right of access to businesses and homes for deliveries and parking is balanced with the need for safe walking and cycling can have a major impact on the practicality of a journey – as well as on the quality of the local environment for the community. Without kerb access delivery vehicles may just block traffic flow, and the increasing need to charge electric vehicles on the kerbside is adding to those pressures.

Conclusion

Highway authorities considering changes to the allocation of road space need to recognise the importance of these consumer issues, and design and implement their schemes accordingly. Our discussions with user stakeholders showed the need for careful implementation, making sure that road users understand the rationale and how a scheme changes what they can and cannot do. Good design and good quality infrastructure needs to be accompanied by a clear set of rules for road use which incorporate maximum flexibility for distinct user needs.

Fair allocation of scarce urban road space is no easy task. Even though we found universal support for encouraging active travel, it will not be enough just to increase the amount of walking and cycling. How the network performs in terms of congestion and safety will determine the success of reallocation measures. The prominent media focus on gains hoped for by some, alongside losses feared by others, has not helped effective decision-making, which should be steered by careful evaluation of impacts once schemes have had time to bed in. That assessment must focus on how easily people and businesses are able to continue to use the road network in one form or other to meet their needs, guided by the nine principles we have identified.

How we did it

Transport Focus worked with input from its sister organisation London TravelWatch. Fourteen in-depth phone interviews were conducted on behalf of Transport Focus in March 2021, with stakeholders representing a variety of different groups using urban roads.

Discussion focused on:

- the overall view on consumer needs and wants when making journeys on urban roads by journey type
- differences on needs and wants by length of journey, time of day and type of road
- issues and concerns about road allocation changes
- specific issues and concerns regarding:
 - Low Traffic Neighbourhoods
 - reconfiguration of road layout on main roads
 - principles and priorities when making decisions on allocation of road space.