Integrated National Transport Strategy: a call for ideas

Respondent details

Q1. You are responding as an:
organisation?

Organisation details

Q8. What is the name of your organisation?
Transition Tavistock

Q9. You are:
content to continue contact via email travel@transitiontavistock.org.uk

Q10. What is the approximate total number of employees in your organisation?
1

Q11. What best describes your organisation?
Another type of organisation: Community group (all volunteers)

Joined up working

Q15. In your opinion, how could the transport network be better ‘joined-up’?

Recognise the importance of the start and end of journeys.
Walking (which includes wheeling throughout this response) is part of every trip, even if taken by car. Public transport use is affected by convenience and safety of walking to stops from home and from destinations (eg school, health centre, shop, workplace). This is a particular issue in rural settlements where it is common to have sections of road with no footway at all, or a single footway which swaps sides without a crossing point. Many villages are cut in half by busy roads with no marked crossing point.

Enable completion, extension and proper maintenance of the National Cycle Network.
We have some excellent short stretches of NCN27 in our area, used both by local people and international tourists. However, as elsewhere, there are gaps where cyclists have to use busy roads, and stretches which are now wearing out. Additional connections from the NCN to nearby public facilities, transport hubs, and new housing also have huge potential, as Sustrans has pointed out. There is a major employment area in the north of Plymouth which could be connected to the NCN by a new traffic free path fit for commuters. While there has been some consultation on a route, there is no assurance it will ever be funded. Meanwhile the fittest and most confident cyclists risk the A386, annoying drivers, and the rest drive to work instead.

Ensure public transport timetables, ticketing and interchanges join up.
As a group based in one of the peripheral areas of the country, we are aware of the potential benefit of rail travel for reaching other parts of the country, but also of the deterrent effect of high prices, complex ticket options, and risk of delays. This is compounded by difficulty in finding convenient and timely bus connections to the railway. We hope that Great British Railways will give strong and effective leadership, prioritising passengers over rail companies.
We welcomed the reopening of the rail line from Okehampton to Exeter, along with a connecting bus to Tavistock. However use of this by Tavistock residents is hampered by gaps in the afternoon bus timetable and no buses in the evening. This puts more pressure on the station car park, with the risk of not finding a space also deterring prospective travellers. In Plymouth, working out which buses pass close to the railway station requires detective work.

Data and technology

Q16. How could data be used to improve the transport network?

Encourage provision and awareness of sources of comprehensive, accurate and relevant information on travel options.

In surveys of passengers at Tavistock Bus Station, and other discussions, we find variable awareness of existing ways to access information on transport options, routes and timetables, both online and offline. While apps such as Traveline are useful, people who normally drive, or only use a regular bus route, may be unaware of them, and just “google”. Though improving, online maps lack quality information on traffic free links. (We have produced a “Walkable Tavistock” printed map as an alternative which has proved very popular.) Information on local options, eg community transport, cycle hire, is patchy, as is information on facilities needed by some passengers, eg WCs, step-free access, seats at bus stops.

Information on where to make complaints and constructive comments about transport could be much clearer – ideally with a single portal to channel them to the right place. This would also give insights into the simple changes that could make sustainable travel easier. Examples of issues raised with us include footways obstructed by badly placed A-boards, overgrown hedges, or temporary road signs; poor communication of bus timetable changes, and how to suggest better timings; failure to mark bus stops on new estates, requests for more cycle parking, and dangerous pavement parking. The current system for claiming refunds for delayed trains can involve log in to multiple systems for one journey.

Q17. How could technology be used to improve the transport network?

While there is scope for this, the design and regulation needs to work in rural contexts.

At present there are established e-scooter schemes in cities, but none we are aware of in a market town, let alone a cluster of villages. Until the high casualty rates on the roads of Devon and Cornwall are reduced it is hard to see where they could make a significant contribution. What we do already have is use of ride-on mobility scooters by mainly elderly owners. Electric-assist cycles play an important role in our hilly terrain and in enabling people to keep cycling for longer. There is also scope for e-cargo bikes for local or last mile deliveries.

Uber and similar e-hailing rides do not operate in our area although traditional taxis can be hard to get at busy times. We are aware of a few schemes in other rural areas which have demand-responsive transport, and think this is worth further government support to find an adaptable model for wider use.
We are concerned at autonomous vehicles using the public highway, since their development and testing so far has been in urban contexts. Use on rural roads requires the ability to safely navigate a narrow, twisting lane with uneven surface, “Devon hedges” interspersed with protruding trees and half open gates, used by walkers (sometimes in groups, often with dogs), cyclists (including children), tractors and farm animals. Once this standard is demonstrably achieved, they could indeed be useful, eg a shuttle service from an inland car park to a beach, or to enable most cars to be banned from selected roads.

However any transport system reliant on use of the mobile phone network will, under current circumstances, fail in parts of the countryside, as there are numerous spots where signal is weak.

Call for ideas

Q48. How, if at all, would you improve the way decisions are made about the transport network?

We welcome the plan for a national transport strategy, as this gives the potential to recognise the transport needs of rural residents, and to set policies which recognise the interconnectedness of city, town and countryside.

We are a volunteer run local group advocating for more sustainable travel in an area which is on the far west of Devon, beside the border with Cornwall, and only 10 miles from the Plymouth City Council boundary. Many local residents cross these boundaries frequently on work, utility and leisure journeys. In local consultations we regularly stress the need to ensure transport plans work for cross-boundary trips, as these rarely get proper attention.

Where central government sets guidelines for local transport planning, at any scale, we would like to see more attention to the needs of those on the geographic margins. We would like to see a move away from competitive bidding for funds for transport, as it is a core service so allocation should be needs based, the needs measures including recognition of the challenges faced by rural areas. In recent years we have seen transport related government funding to neighbouring local authorities, and to Devon with its focus on the urban areas in the east, bring little benefit to our part of the county, and sometimes harm. For example, services on a short bus route across the Tamar were reduced, as ineligible to benefit from Cornwall’s Bus Service Improvement Plan grant, which was far higher than Devon’s.
Our Travel Action Group intentionally takes a holistic approach to sustainable transport, while recognising the “transport hierarchy” of the Highway Code. We would like government to do the same, at both national and local levels. The strategic approach to planning highways, railways and buses does not seem joined up, and, as Transport for New Homes has demonstrated, is disconnected from development of new housing. As an example, we still hope to see the Tavistock to Plymouth rail line restored, but the station location will require a new traffic free path and a bus meeting each train to avoid causing congestion. It is not clear where responsibility for ensuring this lies. Meanwhile initiatives such as car share schemes and encouraging active travel are left to charities and community groups, with any support from public funds unpredictable and short term.
We would like to see local authorities enabling the public to identify small improvements to highways in their area (including cycleways, bus stops etc), drawing on map based crowdsourcing tools such as WidenMyPath. This would give people a means to make constructive suggestions for relatively low cost changes, rather than just (as now) report faults.

We would like to see a much simpler, lower cost, system for setting speed limits below the default levels – eg 20mph rather than 30 in a residential area or shopping street, 30mph or 40mph on a country lane. It is ridiculous that 60mph is the legal limit on many roads where cars have to slow to a crawl to pass each other. Where new housing estates are constructed, the speed limit could be 20mph from the start, with a case needing to be made for individual streets to have a higher limit, rather than the reverse as at present.

Final comments

Q49. Any other comments?

Road safety is important to us. People in Devon are far more likely to be killed or seriously injured in a road collision than by violence from a stranger. We support the safe systems approach to road safety, and would like to see the strategy taking account of the recommendations of the Chartered Institute of Highways & Transportation recent report “Progressing the UK towards Safe System implementation - reducing the number of people killed and seriously injured on UK roads”.

Transport policy should aim to reduce dependence on individual car ownership in both urban and rural areas. Even in West Devon, 13% of households have no access to a car or van, so policy should not assume they have. However 45% households in West Devon have 2 or more vehicles. The cost of purchasing and maintaining the extra ones can strain household finances, and is a diversion of resources that could be circulating in the local economy, or invested in making homes more energy efficient. The parking space required diverts space from more beneficial private or public uses, eg gardens, and can add to flood risk. In addition to making public transport and active travel more accessible, government policy should support and promote car clubs and similar sharing schemes, giving families more choice of ways to meet their travel needs.