

## LOCAL TRANSPORT PLANS - AND YOU

by Wendy Le-Las

Joining the trinity of the Structure Plan, the Local Plan and the Unitary Development Plan, is a newcomer, which in due course will graduate to statutory status, the Local Transport Plan (LTP). Whence has it come, where should it go, and how does it involve local councils?

During the nineties there has been a progressive realisation that our much prized mobility has a downside: congestion costs estimated by the CBI at £15b a year; traffic accidents; deteriorating public transport services coupled with increasing fares; the social exclusion of the poor and disabled; the urbanisation of the countryside; crime; air pollution; and health hazards ranging from asthma to all the stress related diseases. Then there is the little matter of global warming. Following the Kyoto Summit Britain acquired a legally binding target of reducing green house gases by 12.5% by 2008 - this is the equivalent of 27m tons of carbon. Most of this would come from exhaust pipes.

Without drastic action the population of cars would increase by a third over the next twenty years, and the number of lorries and vans by even more. Clearly this situation cannot be allowed to continue. Although the previous Government made a valiant start in reorientating the planning system away from the private car and encouraging eco-friendly modes of transport, the incoming administration decided that an integrated transport policy, backed up by legal fiscal and administrative changes, was the only way to achieve the desired results: Hence the publication of the Transport White Paper in July 1998 .

Put simply, it is about the ways and means of creating an integrated transport system. It deals with the link with EU policy; the role of national government, and of regional planning authorities; and, what is billed as the centrepiece of their proposals, the new local transport plans. In November 1998, DETR issued its Draft Guidance on Local Transport Plans , which provides practical advice on how to get us out of our cars etc. Whose job is it? LTPs are the responsibility of the erstwhile highway authorities i.e. county councils or unitary authorities. Although the latter tend to be smaller in area than the former, both will be liaising with neighbouring authorities. They will also be talking to local people, businesses, transport operators and users, those providing health and education services, and environmental organisations. As the Draft Guidance says:

*The development of plans may involve some difficult and potentially contentious decisions. A genuinely inclusive approach will be vital if authorities are going to achieve the widespread support necessary to deliver the change in travel patterns required. Moreover local people will have knowledge and insight about existing problems (not to mention ideas for resolving them) that may be helpful in formulating strategies. LTPs should be readily available at libraries and other locations...Authorities will need to consider how Plans can be made available in rural areas.....Possibilities include the parish council, village hall or post office. We will be looking for authorities to adhere to the following principles of effective participation: early involvement; interaction (effective participation requires a two way dialogue); inclusive (involving all local interest groups); continuous; open; and with effective feedback to participants.*

Clearly local councils could play a key role in acting as a voice for local people and a convenor for local groups, in raising the issues and in helping to formulate solutions to problems. The approach adopted by the White Paper and Draft Guidance is that you consider the differing mobility requirements within your community: access to facilities by the young, the disabled, the unemployed, and those on low incomes, including the elderly, as well as the travel needs of the working population. No doubt you are well acquainted with problems in your area. Nonetheless reading the White Paper etc throws new light on walking, cycling, public transport, traffic restraint in town and country, reducing air pollution, improving safety etc. You will be able to judge how well the proposed LTP matches your community's needs and Government intentions.

When will all this happen? Provisional Plans have to be available by July this year. They are expected to cover the full range of issues and give a progress report on: widening travel choices; traffic management and demand restraint; highways; rural transport; information; social inclusion; crime; air quality, noise etc. It seems that proper debate and analysis is more important than a polished product. In the real world it is unlikely that there will be much public participation until the autumn: people need a draft plan upon which to focus before they can comment. The full Plans have to be ready by July 2000, and have a five year life span.

The timescale is not the only problem. With whom do you liaise over the long term future of public transport when the operators are only concerned about keeping shareholders happy until 2004, for example? Then there Members whose manhood's are affronted by realistic parking charges, let alone road pricing. Authorities which pride themselves on having no debt, don't like the sound of credit approvals to fund their proposals. LTPs will take the place of the TPP system in terms of bidding for Government finance. The next 18 months promise to be a lively time.

Apart from coping with the adverse effects of traffic, and promoting mobility in your area, LTPs could also be a useful weapon in planning battles. It is rare for access not to be on the list of objections, and even when a development itself is acceptable, the traffic it will generate is not. Take three examples from my current caseload

- Everyone agrees that Bracknell town centre is due for a facelift. There are two rival schemes: one is for a sub regional shopping centre of 102,000 sq. m. and the other for a mere 62,000 sq. m. The former is proposing 7,100 free parking spaces whereas the latter proposes a mere 3,200 spaces to be paid for, together with a comprehensive public transport package. The Secretary of State has called-in the applications and a public inquiry starts in March. Naturally the villages nearby are concerned about traffic increases, particularly from the bigger schemes. The Borough Council admits that the inquiry's outcome will determine the character of the LTP and the Town Centre section of the Local Plan. At the inquiry the consortium of villages will compare the transportation proposals of both schemes with the White Paper and the Draft Guidance because that is the approach the Secretary of State is bound to adopt.

- In the Report on Swale's Local Plan Inquiry, the Inspector re-routed the proposed Northern Distributor Road around Sittingbourne at the behest of local house builders who would fund it. Instead of being bypassed, the village of Bapchild would now "benefit" from all the traffic. The NDR will still have to be appraised by Kent CC, using a method akin to that set out in the Draft

Guidance. This includes: environmental impact; safety; reducing community severance; creating access to facilities; promoting sustainable development; and furthering integrated transport policy. Bapchild PC now have a yardstick against which to appraise any glossy documents justifying the NDR route, produced by the developers consultants. Government policy also provides and a good reason for suggesting to Swale Borough Council that a Modification putting the NDR on the Local Plan Map is premature. Bapchild PC are at the start of a tough campaign to convince the Members of Swale BC and KCC that the route of the NDR should be determined in the best interests of the community, not short term demands of Sittingbourne's housing allocation.

· For some extraordinary reason Essex Structure Plan appears to separate housing allocations from employment growth areas within the county: the former proposals are located in the mid county Boroughs, and the latter around the periphery at Stansted, the Thames Gateway, and Harwich. Chelmsford Borough has an additional problem: 45% of the Borough is Green Belt and 10% liable to flooding. Thus the remaining villages foresee the advent of urban sprawl to the north and east of Chelmsford. They will be interested to see how the LTP, which is scheduled to appear at the same time as the Examination In Public of the Structure Plan, will "solve" the commuting problems created by the planners. Certainly they are using the White Paper etc in their objection to Essex CC, and they hope for a seat at the EIP table.

The White Paper and Draft Guidance present local councils with a new opportunity to solve, or at least ameliorate, the transport problems in their patch, and could provide ammunition to be used in any planning dispute.

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