

Executive Summary

Introduction

This report is the product of a short research project commissioned by the DETR in early 1998, to examine the case for introducing accessibility standards into the planning system, in support of the policies set out in planning guidance (especially PPG's 1, 6 and 13). Accessibility is defined as the general ease of reaching or being reached, and not the specific meaning attached to discussions of accessibility for those with disabilities.

Context of the research

The Ove Arup study into the implementation of PPG13 indicated a lack of progress by authorities in implementing limits on car parking in developments and improving accessibility by other modes. New standards for accessibility should address these difficulties and influence the development planning process so that private and public sector interests are channelled in the same sustainable direction.

Accessibility standards would also be consistent with other possible policy changes and mechanisms currently under consideration by the Government, including the possibility of a commitment to reduce the absolute level of road traffic, and fiscal and planning mechanisms for delivering it. They could lie at the heart of an integrated approach to land use and transport, and be a major contributor to its effective implementation.

A new accessibility standard

The proposed concept is for a "Mode Choice Minimum" or "MCM" standard, which provides a framework for determining applications for non-residential development. It would ensure that developments are planned so that access by non-car modes does not fall below a specified minimum. The MCM would require all developments to operate on a multi-modal basis, thus serving the whole community, and would exclude the possibility of schemes which rely wholly or largely on the private car for their viability.

The MCM is seen as a device not only for limiting the environmental and social impacts of individual developments, but also for encouraging developments of the appropriate type and location to avoid car dependence, and to boost the development of accessible brownfield sites.

Development applications would include a calculation of mode split to show how the MCM standard is to be met. This would be part of a Transport Assessment which included wider aspects of transport and traffic impact. Parking would be based on the MCM, taking off-site provision into account.

Social inclusion

In addition to environmental and urban revitalisation objectives, the study paid particular attention to the objective of social inclusion. The eradication of social exclusion is an important Government objective, though transport does not always figure very prominently in the debate. The report describes how current development practice contributes to social exclusion, by cutting off substantial sections of the population from access to facilities of all kinds. It also argues that development schemes based on deliberate social stratification are reducing the quality of facilities available to those with fewer mobility options, including those with disabilities.

Attention is given to the social exclusion impacts of certain health and education policies, and the authors call for a review within the health and education services of the accessibility impacts of service planning and provision.

From parking standards to accessibility standards

Parking standards based on keeping cars off the street continue to mean that car dependence is “built in” to development schemes. Policy guidance advocates restraint-based parking standards, but implementation has been poor. Put simply, if a local authority wants to limit the number of parking spaces in a development and promote alternative modes, it faces the prospect of a different authority offering more parking and not asking for contributions for other modes. Developers may then withdraw a scheme, or go elsewhere. The fear and the threat of this happening significantly weakens the negotiating position of local authorities.

Access standards could be more effective in promoting developments which are not dependent on the car, and which are accessible by more sustainable modes of travel. Some local authorities, e.g. Nottingham, are already looking for a new approach which is better related to sustainable transport objectives.

A national minimum for mode choice

The actual figures to be included in the MCM standard must be set according to policy objectives. The suggestion is for a minimum of 50% of person trips to developments to be made by means other than the car, and a concomitant ceiling of 50% person trips by car (or private motorised transport). This will halt the excesses of car growth that at present are fuelled by most developments in non-central locations, and will in addition counterbalance “background” traffic growth.

A ceiling of 50% for car drivers and passengers is a manageable change from the current national average of 60%. At 50%, the MCM would set in train significant restructuring within the development process, in line with PPG13 policies. In addition, incentives should be provided to encourage development which operates with car access below the ceiling. Three mechanisms can potentially achieve this, namely fiscal mechanisms, such as the recommended Parking Space Charge, planning policies such as the PPG6

sequential test, and the response of market forces to the new accessibility regime.

How does the MCM relate to wider strategies?

The MCM fits with accessibility levels by different modes, in order to guide development to appropriate locations: “the right business in the right place”. In the formulation of development plans, area-wide accessibility profiles may reduce the need for individual MCM calculations. The MCM standard would also give added weight to, and benefit from, voluntary mechanisms to promote more sustainable travel choices, such as local Travelwise campaigns and Green Travel Plans.

Mode split of trips as the key indicator

The report explores in some detail the benefits of using mode split of trips as the key accessibility indicator. Although mode share of distance travelled may be a more direct indicator of traffic impact, the problems of data collection outweigh the advantages. Moreover, a case is made that traffic impact is in fact more closely related to trips than is generally acknowledged.

Variations of the MCM?

The authors see no convincing case for variation of the MCM by location or by region. Almost all the (land use) problems arising from current methods of traffic restraint relate to the powerful tendency for developers to avoid restraint measures by migrating to areas where restraint is not applied.

A distinction should be made between the value of flexibility to take account of local circumstances, and flexibility which is used to gain competitive advantage in attracting private sector development. The latter is regarded as wasteful, and leads to less sustainable development solutions.

Within the MCM standard, however, there would be considerable scope for variation at the implementation level, in particular the split between the non-car modes, and the manner in which parking is provided.

Specific business needs

Exceptions should be as few as possible, to avoid loopholes in the system. There will, however, be certain types of development for which the MCM standard would be inappropriate. Motorway service stations would be an obvious example. Businesses such as haulage and distribution which are best located near to the non-urban road network also will need to be taken into account. Further consideration will need to be given to whether MCM standards should be varied according to land use, or whether exceptions to the standard are more appropriate. The role of the General Development Order, and the case for its revision will be relevant to such further study.

Enforcing and monitoring the MCM standard

The MCM will require a calculation of the intended and predicted mode split of trips to developments. Following completion, it will be necessary to ensure compliance with the MCM. The report discusses important issues concerning data collection, and the use of appropriate mechanisms including planning conditions for monitoring and enforcement, including funding.

Residential accessibility standards

Good planning practice requires housing to be provided with primary school, food shopping and other facilities within easy walking distance, and for employment and more specialised urban facilities to be within easy reach by public transport. Consideration has been given to developing criteria for ensuring a minimum standard of accessibility by non-car modes. The authors conclude that it is neither feasible nor desirable to attempt to enforce particular travel or mode choices at the point of origin (i.e. housing). Also, since many local authorities already plan successfully for the provision of local facilities, there is less need for a national standard. Nevertheless, in an annex to the main report, a “proximity standard” is described which could be further developed and applied by local authorities.

Feasibility of the MCM standard

If the MCM standard is to be introduced as a means of improving the implementation of sustainable development, there will be little point in setting it at a level which produces no discernible change in development practice. Acceptance of the principle is therefore a precondition.

The likely responses of developers, local authorities and individuals are discussed. The relative impacts on development in urban and rural situations are also reviewed. The broad conclusion is that the MCM standard will introduce a positive force in the development process, and remove many of the difficulties inherent in current practice whereby sustainability objectives are perceived to be at odds with those of economic and urban regeneration.

Initial resistance from the development industry is likely, but would not signify inability to adapt to the new framework created by the MCM. The new mechanism will not simply force restrictions on an unchanging development market, but will provide a positive incentive for developers to bring forward schemes that contribute to the desired trends. This would be crucial in harnessing market forces to move in a sustainable direction.

There is no doubt that there will need to be a major shift in attitudes, and a period of adjustment to the new framework, but the increased certainty and the consistency which the national standard will offer are believed to outweigh the difficulties.

The resource cost implications of a change in access patterns are likely to be favourable, or at least neutral, since more efficient use will be made of road and other infrastructure, and there should be less need for public support of

public transport. More efficient use of land will result, and there will be less need for investment in road and parking infrastructure.

Implementation

Consideration must be given to the appropriate mechanism for implementing the MCM. Revised planning guidance alone is unlikely to be effective, given the patchy compliance with current guidance. Other options include:

- strengthened planning guidance (e.g. by policy guidance being given precedence over non-conforming local policies in the determination of planning applications and appeals);
- new ways of drawing in private sector money to secure accessibility improvements;
- issue of a Statutory Instrument governing the application of MCM;
- primary legislation, e.g. an Accessibility Act or an amendment to the Planning Act or Road Traffic Reduction Act.

Implementation of the MCM standard will require or prompt changes and responses both within and outside the land use planning system. These may include:

- guidance on methods of accessibility measurement;
- guidance on s106 agreements to secure accessibility improvements;
- appointment of a local authority transport officer to coordinate the transport and planning functions implicated in the MCM;
- development of data on accessibility including, for example, the development of a national database on development types and mode split;
- greater local authority control or influence over public transport, at least the ability to enforce “quality partnership” agreements with local operators;
- a more comprehensive approach to parking control, especially mechanisms for easier introduction of CPZs;
- revision and strengthening of PPG13 to incorporate the MCM;
- need to ensure that the new PPG11 on Regional Planning Guidance incorporates the MCM;
- consideration could be given to setting up special technical units to help both public and private sector bodies in preparing schemes which accord with the MCM.