

Keeping cities moving

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‘Britain among the world’s worst for traffic jams’ - the headline of a news item in *The Times* newspaper, on 6 February 2018. The report revealed that, as measured by the average amount of time spent by motorists in peak time traffic, Britain ranks as the world’s tenth most congested country - behind Thailand, Indonesia, Colombia, Venezuela, Russia, the USA, Brazil, South Africa and Turkey. London was the most congested UK city, ranked seventh in the world - behind Los Angeles, Moscow, New York, Sao Paulo, San Francisco and Bogota.

But the many challenges posed to modern societies by car usage – including traffic congestion, environmental pollution, road safety, motoring-related crime and vehicle and fuel taxation - are just one important part of a very much bigger picture, a picture that is far from unique to the UK and its capital city. Policy makers and transport providers around the world have constantly to wrestle with the economic and social necessities of facilitating the safe and effective transportation both of their home populations and of those from further afield, travelling for touristic, social and commercial reasons. In doing this they must try to balance the diverse and sometimes conflicting interests of various categories of transport user (local residents, commuters, tourists, etc); and of reconciling the characteristics of different modes of transport - cars, buses, trains, trams, taxis, delivery vans, cyclists, pedestrians and animals.

The quest for solutions inevitably has a political dimension; vocal lobbies of providers and users try constantly to bring influence to bear; transport-related issues often feature in election manifestos. But a lot of the challenges are essentially technical, and some of the possible solutions are technical, too (IT systems, now such a taken-for-granted part of our infrastructure have only been around for a couple of decades). Many countries around the world have been coming up with smart ideas: Nairobi, for example – another very congested city, with big problems of air pollution – has recently moved towards the introduction of car-free days - following in the innovative footsteps of another African capital city, Kigali.

Transport-related challenges are particularly acute in major cities and conurbations. Without an efficient transport infrastructure, they will grind to a halt and become economically and socially dysfunctional. London, currently with a core population of 8.5 million people, with a commuter belt of around 5 million, and with some 38 million overseas visitors every year, is very much a case in point.

London’s transport system mostly works well – but by no means always. The number of travellers has grown exponentially and much of the infrastructure is old. The system has developed piecemeal over many years, through a mixture of public and private enterprise. The first underground railway – the beginnings of the ‘Tube’ network – opened in 1863; other lines were later added, and there is a never-ending saga of repair and upgrade. Tunnels built in the Victorian era, originally to allow horse-drawn vehicles to pass beneath the River Thames, are now used by trains. The Docklands Light Railway, an automated light metro system, with driverless trains, opened in 1987 to serve the redeveloped Docklands area of East London. Although much of the road network is quite modern, much of its layout still shows signs of having been conceived in a more leisurely age, when ‘horsepower’ really did mean horses.

Governance of London's transport system involves a sprawling patchwork of organisations – some more joined-up than others. London buses are operated as commercial franchises under the auspices of the directly elected Mayor of London and the separately elected Greater London Authority (GLA). The main transport network (tubes, buses, trams and river transport) is overseen by an entity called Transport for London (TfL), which is answerable to the Mayor; taxis are licenced by TfL. Other transport-related functions are in the hands of the 32 London boroughs and the Metropolitan Police. The national railway system, partly privatised, partly nationalised, is separate from but linked in various complex ways with London's local transport system. At the apex of the whole institutional edifice there is a central Government ministry, responsible for English transport policy and funding at a macro level - and answerable to the UK Parliament. Those seeking a neat and readily comprehensible organogram of the governance of London's transport will seek in vain.

Much has been and is still being done to modernise and improve the system. Recent and continuing developments include the introduction of congestion charging for vehicles entering central London (reminiscent, perhaps, of Nairobi's and Kigali's car-free days); the still ongoing (and much delayed) construction of a massive east-west Crossrail overground link; a facility for hiring bicycles from numerous locations (administered by the GLA, with commercial sponsorship); the proliferation of residents-only parking zones (now a significant source of local authority revenue) – and much else besides.

The picture is mixed – with many upsides, many downsides and a lot of daunting challenges still to be overcome. We in London have a lot both to learn and to offer from sharing and comparing our transport experiences with those of other cities and urban communities around the world. PAI has designed a one-week professional development workshop for that very purpose. *Keeping Cities Moving: London's transport system in the 21st century* will run from 16 to 20 September 2019. Details of the programme and guidance on how to apply can be found at www.public-admin.co.uk. Please come and join us!