



Newcastle University Estate Support Services

Focus Groups on Travel Behaviour (2010)

Summary Report

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Executive Summary

Newcastle University is located close to the centre of the city, employing around 4,900 staff (2008/09 figures). The University is committed to minimising the impact of its daily operations on the environment, including the promotion of alternative methods for travelling to/from the campus. Through the University's Travel Plan, Estate Support Services have reduced private car use to 34%, and are working towards a revised target of 29% for 2011. There is some concern that the reduction in car use will begin to level out unless the University can gain a greater understanding about why current car drivers continue to drive to work

Therefore, these Focus Groups were commissioned to understand why dedicated car users continue to use their cars for commuting to/from the University. It is acknowledged that there will always be a small percentage of car users who refuse to swap modes, and for some employees there is no other feasible or practical option. However, there are also some car users who could be encouraged to make the switch to Public Transport and so it is essential to understand the underlying issues preventing these car users from making this switch.

Four separate Focus Groups were conducted by members of the Transport Operations Research Group, one each with the following user groups:

- Dedicated car users
- Dedicated Public Transport users
- 'Mixed mode' users (travel by multiple modes, or different modes on different days)
- A combination of all the above user groups

The Focus Groups revealed some interesting findings about employees' views, opinions and needs on commuting to/from the University; a summary of these is given herein. More specific details are provided in the full report.

The issues raised in this work will be used by Estate Support Services in conjunction with the annual Travel to Work surveys, to help identify future strategies for promoting greater use of alternative modes of travel for commuting to/from Newcastle University.

1 Methodology

1.1 Focus Groups

Focus Groups (FGs) are a form of qualitative research where a small group of individuals are asked about their perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes towards a specific issue. Questions are asked in an interactive group setting where participants are free to talk with other participants around the table and discuss their ideas and opinions. To encompass the views from as many different perspectives as possible, participants for this study were selected from three key user groups: dedicated car users, dedicated Public Transport users and those who use a mixture of modes (e.g. car users, who occasionally use the bus). Four separate FGs of approximately 45-60 minutes in duration were conducted:

- Dedicated car users
- Dedicated PT users
- 'Mixed mode' users (travel by multiple modes, or different modes on different days)
- A combination of all the above user groups

1.2 Topics Addressed in the Focus Groups

The main issues/questions addressed in the FGs were as follows:

- Why do car users continue to use their cars for commuting?
- What are the perceived barriers to PT use which prevent car users from making the switch?
- What are the specific issues which need to be overcome? (E.g. a lack of regular PT services due to peak flow demands, with little custom outside peak hours; part-time working and limited ticketing available to meet these needs etc.)
- Would car sharing be a viable option for more people, if they were aware of the possibilities?
- Why do PT users actually use PT services? (E.g. Do they have no other option, is it a conscious decision or something they enjoy?)
- What changes would PT users like to see to improve their journeys?
- What do PT users believe needs to be done to attract other people out of their cars?
- How can peoples' opinions about PT use be changed for the better, to encourage greater use of these modes?

1.3 Ethical Considerations

Before the FGs commenced, all participants were informed that any information recorded and obtained during the FG would be treated in strict confidence and used for research and reporting purposes only. No comments would be attributable to the individual who gave them.

All FGs were recorded to assist with the writing of this report, with the prior permission of all FG participants. A consent form was completed by all participants, which doubled as their entry into the prize draw.

2 Findings from the Focus Groups

2.1 Key Findings from the Focus Groups

The FGs provided some interesting views and opinions on current car use and PT alternative for the purpose of commuting to/from Newcastle University; these are given in greater detail in the full report. Whilst there were some difference in opinions between those who used their car and those who used PT, a number of common problems, themes and issues were raised across all FGs, and these are summarised here.

2.2 On Campus Parking

One of the main drivers behind these FGs was the reduction in parking in and around the central campus of the University. Many participants cited the lack of parking as a major source of concern, and were leaving home earlier in order to be sure of obtaining a parking space. Others were paying substantial sums for dedicated spaces in the adjacent City Council car park on Claremont Road, but felt that this outlay was worthwhile as it avoided the stress of finding a space.

There is clearly a conflict between the needs of employees who have no other option than their car for commuting, and the wider environmental and sustainability policies of Newcastle University. There is limited available land for any expansion of car parking provision, and this would be counterintuitive to existing policies.

2.3 Key Advantages of the Car

For many participants who travelled from further afield, the car provided flexibility, faster journey times and the combined cost of petrol and parking was cheaper than the equivalent PT fares. In the evenings, PT service frequency on some routes reduced to half-hourly or less, which meant that people would be tied to the timetable to ensure they would get home at a reasonable hour. Using the car meant they did not have this worry, and by being able to work flexible hours, participants felt the University was benefitting.

2.4 Key Advantages of Public Transport

The major advantage for those participants who used PT was that they did not have to hunt for a parking space around the campus. They were also able to read whilst on their way into work and arrived more relaxed allowing them to have a more productive day. Depending on their journey's origin, some participants found the PT cost to be lower than that of the car, although some participants noted that multi-modal journeys (e.g. metro then bus) were more expensive.

2.5 Key Disadvantages of the Car

As noted, the limited parking around the campus was a major source of stress and frustration for car users. The cost of parking and parking permits were also increasing, but for many these were costs they were willing to pay, and it was felt that parking costs would have to increase significantly before PT alternatives would be considered.

2.6 Key Disadvantages of Public Transport

A major disincentive to travelling by PT was overcrowding on services and a lack of personal space, a view shared by PT users and PT non-users alike. For those who used the metro, the problems were mainly confined to the evening peak, however for those who commuted by local rail services, all peak time services were found to be overcrowded.

Bus service conditions were variable depending on the distance travelled and the service provider. A significant factor was the actual size of vehicle used and a greater consistency in fleet provision which would help eliminate the uncertainty about whether getting a seat.

Uncertainty about where and when services ran was another barrier to PT use. The provision of information about changes to bus service timetables and routes was an area where participants felt operators could do more. The provision of a Personal Travel Plan service would be welcomed, to help people better understand what PT services existed in their area.

2.7 Car Clubs and Lift Sharing

The variable nature of working hours within the academic sector meant that Car Clubs and Lift Sharing were not deemed to be suitable options for commuting. Given the need to align working hours with other employees, it was felt that it would be difficult to successfully commit to a lift share scheme, whereas in places with fixed hours, lift sharing may be more feasible. There would be a worry that individuals would let others down if they were late, and there would be the inconvenience of having to wait for others if they were late.

If dedicated parking spaces were provided for those involved in a lift share scheme, guaranteeing a parking space no matter what time they arrived on campus, then participants may be more inclined to get involved in a future scheme.

No participant had been involved with a car club scheme, and some had not heard of them. Greater publicity on the benefits of such schemes may be one way of introducing people to car clubs and perhaps encourage future use.

2.8 Park and Ride – Future Options

The lack of P&R opportunities was highlighted as a key barrier to the wider use of PT services, particularly from the south and west of Newcastle. Developments in P&R services in this area would essentially fall under the remit of Gateshead Council who outline the importance of P&R in their Unitary Development Plan (2007), whilst Nexus are also looking at the development of P&R through a major bus scheme bid to the Government, which if successful should see work commence in 2011.

2.9 Consultations with Public Transport Operators

One issue raised by participants in the PT User FG was the lack of regular consultation opportunities with the PT service providers. It was noted that ‘meet the manager’ and ‘bus surgery’ events were usually held at times when commuters were at work and results of consultations were primarily made up of the views and opinions of retired people. These were of little use to those travelling on overcrowded peak time services and the opportunity to have monthly consultations with service providers, provided at a suitable time and at a venue on campus would be welcomed by many.