

# Reframing Sustainable Transport

*Stephen Potter, Per-Anders Langendahl, Matthew Cook, Open University, UK*

Transport is responsible for growing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and there is little policy effect. Transport is therefore proving to be a difficult area to resolve in the context of sustainable development. Transport is often conceived as a technical problem: ethical responsibility to improve environmental performance can be delegated to new technologies. However, research suggests that the impacts of this approach are limited by a number of challenges linked to transport being an ingrained part of our economy and social behaviour. This has led some to conceive transport as a behavioural problem: the transport problem can only be resolved by changes in human behaviour. One policy that is based on a behavioural approach is the promotion of Travel Plans, whereby businesses are encouraged to green staff and visitor travel through a variety of measures (e.g. supporting cycling, introduce car share schemes, charge for parking and promote public transport access to their sites). More recently, local authorities (Transport for London in particular) have sought to also encourage businesses to green business travel as well.

However, while adoption of Travel Plans has increased and greener business travel initiatives have started to take place, they are organizationally isolated and have limited impact on transport activity. This paper will report research conducted for Transport for London that suggests that Travel Plans and business travel fit a certain organisational logic which means they end up isolated and marginalised. Despite yielding benefits across an organisation, the traditional conceptualisation and logics for these transport initiatives mean that they remain locked into established modes of thinking and the structures that reflect this practice. For example, a Travel Plan tends to become a facilities/estates function and needs to be justified in the terms of that function. Positive impacts on staff morale, health, retention etc. are not part of a facilities agenda. CSR and Branding benefits are likewise real, but cannot be comprehended in most organisations. Equally, there are business travels that are traditionally a departmental or fleet management function, with no real links to an organisation's wider strategic approaches. Only in exceptional situations are these barriers overcome.

This paper seeks to develop a different understanding that can help overcome this problem. It considers how organisations construct an understanding of the relevance of travel issues to them and the consequent actions they took in light of these. In other words it explores the organisational logics associated with travel issues. It also casts transport as neither a technological nor behavioural problem. Rather, drawing on emerging transitions literature, it conceives transport as a socio-technical system containing human and non human technological elements which are cast in certain relationships and difficult to separate. Travel plans conceived not as behavioural but rather socio-technical terms are thus considered. The paper shows how, if conceived in this way, travel plans may accord with different organizational logics and that these may lead travel plans to be less organizationally isolated and effective.

Key words: socio-technical, organizational logics, travel plans