

CATERING FOR CARS

The Strategic Business Plan has not included plans for any of the anticipated 300m additional passengers to be able to drive to stations. Tony Duckenfield looks at the implications

The Network Rail Strategic Business Plan is an encouraging document, which indicates that we're now planning for a successful railway, with a 30 per cent growth in the next 10 years. There are going to be capacity upgrades, station redevelopments and new trains. However, there is one potential fly in the ointment – how are all the extra 300m (Transport Statistics DfT, 2008) passengers going to get to a station?

One of the clearest warning signs for this impending problem can be found in the National Passenger Survey, conducted by Passenger Focus. This shows that, perhaps surprisingly, facilities for car parking are at the bottom of the satisfaction list, along with value for money and the state of on-board toilets. This puts it well below more obvious concerns like reliability, station environment, seat availability and so on. Worryingly, this evidence is just the tip of the iceberg, the most visible evidence.

Recent experience working on four different rail franchise bids (two commuter, one long

distance and one regional) involved examining the market and the potential for expanding it. The problem arose of getting people to the station, and specifically lack of car parking spaces. Even worse, on detailed analysis, we found very good evidence that potential passengers are already being put off and that demand is currently being suppressed by insufficient station car parking.

This issue was also uncovered in the Greater Anglia Route Utilisation Strategy (RUS), and here we developed a method for quantifying the effect of car parking shortages. The summary results have been published by Passenger Focus, but the key headline is that in the area examined, there was a shortfall of roundly 3,000 parking spaces, which was leading to a loss of rail travel of around one-fifth.

Although the evidence for the scale of this problem is compelling, there are some counter-arguments:

- Only a minority of passengers use cars to get to a station – true, but since people living within

an easy walk of a station tend to already be users, new customers tend to be people who would drive to the station;

- Not all car parks are completely full – also true, but stations which have a good service and which people want to use often have very full car parks, and a car park doesn't have to be 100 per cent full to put people off, or for users to have to waste time, and possibly miss their train, finding a space;

- Just because someone can't find a parking space doesn't mean they won't travel by rail – not generally true. By definition these people have a car and using it for their whole journey is often an easy option, plus, do we really want to force people to drive further to find a station with parking spaces and thus compromise the carbon benefits of rail travel?

The RUS referred to earlier also highlighted how difficult it can be to increase parking availability: land is often in short supply, road congestion near stations can be a concern, and local authorities can sometimes have a broad-brush 'car is bad' policy.

However, the answer has already been identified, in station travel plans. These can take a more holistic approach, encouraging people to walk and cycle where possible, encourage use of car clubs and car sharing and using dedicated demand-responsive services, all of which can free-up parking spaces for those that really need them, and having done so, provide some breathing space for increasing the supply of parking.

The fear is, though, can these be delivered quickly enough? Since we already have all the tools and expertise to make them work, there is no real reason why not, though there is a tendency for new ideas like this to have a ponderous start. It is therefore worth re-iterating the point that difficulties in accessing the rail network are already limiting demand and, in particular, the kind of off-peak demand which operators are desperate to encourage, to make more efficient use of their rolling stock.

So, to support the solutions to network capacity already being planned, it is vital that the industry starts taking the problem of getting people to the network seriously, and starts working with government to develop and roll out effective station travel plans.

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A carpark that is perceived to be full, even if it has one or two spaces, can force drivers to forget about the train and drive for the whole journey



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