

European Perspectives

New proposal for sustainable urban transport plans across Europe

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“Urban transport systems are critical elements of the urban fabric. They ensure that people have access to goods, services, employment and recreation opportunities, that freight circulates efficiently and they enable local economies to flourish. However, if the high density of buildings is the first defining characteristic of towns and cities, then high volumes of traffic is now the second. Traffic has significant impacts on the environment and on the health of urban citizens, as well as on the overall quality of life in towns. Rising congestion levels are hampering mobility, with increasing costs for the economy (0.5% of Community GDP for road traffic congestion, rising to 1% by 2010).”

So begins one of the sections in the recently published Communication from the European Commission entitled ‘Towards a Thematic Strategy on the Urban Environment’ (CEC, 2004). The communication calls for new measures to deal with the rising volumes of traffic in addition to the various current initiatives such as cleaner fuels, intelligent traffic management systems, emission standards and vehicle safety. Improvements from these current initiatives need to be set against the predicted increase in traffic and congestion in urban areas, the Communication states. Between 1995 and 2030, the number of kilometres travelled in urban areas is predicted to increase by 40% (CEC, 2004:17). The European car fleet has trebled in the last 30 years, and 3 million cars a year are added each year (ibid.). Particularly sharp increases in car ownership and use are likely in many of the new EU countries. Vehicle engines are cleaner than before but the growth in the ownership and the use of the car will make it increasingly difficult to reduce the total environmental impact of the car fleet in the future. Moreover, as the Communication recognises, even with clean vehicles, congestion ‘still has high economic costs’ (CEC, 2004:17). As the White Paper on

European Transport Policy highlighted in 2001 ‘the big problem that urban authorities will have to resolve, sooner than might be thought, is that of traffic management, and in particular the role of the private car in large urban centres’ (CEC, 2001:80).

Tackling transport demand in urban areas is of particular importance for a number of reasons, according to the 2004 Communication from the European Commission. Issues of air quality, noise, congestion and safety are still at unacceptable levels in many cities despite actions taken to tackle emissions, manage traffic and improve safety. Increases in transport demand threaten to worsen air quality, noise, congestion and safety, reduce the quality of life in cities and increase development pressures on peri-urban areas. There are various types of measures, instruments and policies that can be used to help to tackle transport demand. Technology of various types (information and communication technology for example) and pricing of transport and infrastructure can make an important contribution as well as regulations such as parking and land-use planning controls.

As a way of tackling transport demand in urban areas, the 2004 urban environment thematic strategy document puts forward the proposal that the capital cities of Member States, as well as towns and cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants, should prepare, adopt and implement a sustainable urban transport plan (CEC, 2004:17). Such plans would therefore be required in approximately 500 towns and cities across the EU25. According to the Communication, the sustainable urban transport plan would cover the whole urban area, would seek to reduce the negative impacts of transport and tackle the rising volumes of traffic and congestion, and would link to regional and national plans and strategies. It would cover all modes of transport and seek to change the modal split in favour of more efficient transport modes such as public transport, cycling and walking. One of its basic objectives would be to create a more environmentally efficient transport system that serves all of the town’s citizens. The link with land-use would be an essential component. The plan would be linked with the town or city’s overall plans and objectives for environmental, economic and social development (CEC, 2004:18). To complement and support these local plans, the Communication proposes that all Member States will also be encouraged to seek to internalise the external costs of transport through measures such as taxation, road user charging and licence fees, and to undertake evaluations after the introduction of new measures in order to improve understanding about the effects on the sustainability of the urban transport system.

According to the Communication, such plans would help these 500 or so towns and cities in the EU to meet the requirements of EU Directives on air quality and noise assessment and management, and would contribute to meeting the Kyoto agreement targets. The plans would play a particularly important role to maintain the existing levels of use of more efficient transport modes in the new EU countries, the Communication asserts, since a much larger proportion of the public uses public transport systems in these countries compared to the EU average, although this use is falling and car ownership is rapidly rising.

The urban environment thematic strategy document recognises that something similar to sustainable urban transport plans can already be found in some EU countries such as Finland, France, Italy, the Netherlands and the UK (CEC, 2004:17). It is therefore conceivable that the impacts may not be great for these Member States if the proposal is implemented. The

current Local Transport Plans produced in England and Wales or the municipal traffic and transport plans (*Gemeentelijke Verkeers- en Vervoersplannen*) produced in the Netherlands or the urban movement plans (*plans de déplacements urbain*) produced in France could, for example, be sufficient to satisfy the requirements of a sustainable urban transport plan. This is, however, speculation as the situation regarding the proposal for sustainable urban transport plans is still currently under consideration within the European Commission. The 2004 urban environment thematic strategy document reports that the proposal for sustainable urban transport plans will be the subject of further consultations.

According to Eurocities (a network of major European cities), many cities in Europe have already developed their own plans and strategies with regard to sustainable development, including environmental management and urban transport, and most are willing to accept that this should be a requirement for all large cities in the European Union. However, a number of cities are also concerned that the environmental focus of the proposed plans should not detract from the need to ensure a more integrated approach, bringing together environment, transport, health, social, employment and economic policies. Eurocities is therefore urging that the plans should become more wide-ranging, covering all aspects of sustainable urban management. In the UK, the Local Government Association, which represents local authorities in England and Wales, has expressed its opposition to the proposal, stating that the Local Transport Plan process in England and Wales is delivering results and additional requirements could result in ‘an added layer of complexity that could detract from the results already being realised by local authorities’ (LGA, 2004:4).

It is currently unclear how the proposal for sustainable urban transport plans in European towns and cities might affect different EU countries if it is indeed implemented. It is possible to speculate that it may attempt to use the current system already in place in countries such as Finland, France, Italy, the Netherlands and the UK and give greater emphasis to environmental issues and more prominence to the link between transport and land-use planning. More information concerning the proposal for sustainable urban transport plans and the implications for the current system of transport planning in EU countries will emerge within a year since work on the Commission’s Thematic Strategy on the Urban Environment is currently in progress (and due to be published in the summer of 2005), and the European Union’s Sustainable Development Strategy is in the process of being reviewed.

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