

Urban Resilience and Travel Behaviour: Interim findings from a multi-method model to investigate the potential of a grassroots approach and the Internet in promoting sustainable urban travel behaviour

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It is widely acknowledged that the transportation sector is responsible for a major contribution to global warming and climate change. Transport is one of the most significant sources of unsustainability in urban areas, which is mainly a consequence of a growing preference for the use of private cars. Tackling private car use in our cities is seen therefore as a priority in the process of achieving urban sustainability and it now represents a principal matter of concern for planners and policy-makers. Many approaches, however, are aimed at the formal, structural elements of the city (i.e. 'compact city' concept), with little attention being paid to the city 'users'. This project argues that if cities are to build the resilience needed to cope with the challenges posed by peak oil and climate change, their inhabitants must be at the centre of such process. The paper presents this ongoing 4-year research project (commenced end-2009), which has Dublin, Ireland, as study base. The project focuses on residents' behaviour, attitudes and motivations in relation to car use and is aimed at exploring grassroots approaches which may contribute to achieving a shift to more sustainable travel behaviour.

An innovative multi-method approach is adopted throughout the project, which includes: survey with sample population to identify the nature and spatial arrangement of current travel behaviours, focusing on journeys to and from the work place; in-depth qualitative investigation to explore the context (physical, social, cultural, economic) for people's perceptions, attitudes and motivations regarding their use of different travel modes; and action research study to investigate how 'practice champions' could contribute to a shift towards more sustainable travel practices among their communities. The methods explored in this project are drawn from various disciplines such as urban studies, human geography, social sciences and ethnography, ranging from quantitative and spatial analysis studies to 'go-along' interviews and mental mapping exercises. Further contributing to its innovative approach, the study explores the benefits and limitations of using web-based sources, social media in particular, as ethnographic tools and also as a potential powerful medium in the process of behavioural change.

This paper focuses specifically on the rationale behind this methodological approach which is aimed at revealing the complex nature of urban inhabitants' travel behaviour, including the reasons behind their attitudes and daily practices. The paper presents the background to this multi-method approach together with interim findings. These initial results provide an overview of typical work-journey patterns of Dublin residents and an empirical insight into the complexities of such journeys. The paper will conclude with a reflection on how these findings and associated methods add to a better understanding of the wider context in which such everyday practices take place. It will also consider how looking at these practices from the perspective of their 'practitioners' could contribute to promoting an empowering and lasting shift towards more sustainable travel behaviour. This is explored in the context in which, ultimately, such grassroots approaches may be the key to the resilient cities of tomorrow.