

Alternatives to Travel

Focus groups report

Background

Several local authorities agreed to take part in a Department for Transport-funded project to explore the potential to reduce travel – particularly, of course, by car – by exploring Alternatives To Travel (ATT). To help ensure that issues important to local authority workers are not overlooked, a series of focus groups was carried out to explore, in an open and free-flowing manner, how workers and managers had experienced ATT so far, how they felt about the travelling they do, and what changes they might like to see in the future.

The focus groups

Five focus groups were carried out:

21 September 2011 – Kent County Council – one group of 5 workers and one group of 6 managers

26 September 2011 – Dorset County Council – one group of 8 workers

30 September 2011 – Bristol City Council – one group of 7 workers and one group of 6 managers

The protocol

The following protocol can be used in any organisation wanting to conduct focus groups in order to understand more about attitudes to ATT.

We aimed to keep the focus groups relatively unconstrained and free, so that participants had ample opportunity to express their views, unaffected by the facilitators (who attempted throughout to offer no views). Five core questions were prepared to start and, if necessary, advance the focus groups' discussions, providing the following (flexible) protocol:

0. Introduction, scope of the project, ask for participants' names

Stress that the project considers ALL aspects of travel that occur as a result of working for the council – commuting, meetings, site visits, monitoring, etc.

1. Past experiences

“What methods for reducing travel have you tried in the past? I’m thinking of things such as working from home, video conferencing, and so on”

2. Desires for the future

“Thinking about methods such as working from home, videoconferencing and staggering working hours, do you see yourself wanting to do these more or less in the future?”

3. Perceived barriers

“Is there anything that holds you back from using these methods more?”

4. What would help?

“What could be done to help you use these methods more?”

5. Advice

“What advice about travel would you give to a new member of your department/group?”

Key findings

There were several clear themes that recurred across the focus groups. In no particular order, these were:

1. Travel is sometimes inevitable, or at least highly useful

Whilst there was an appetite for reducing travel in every focus group, this was in the context of an understanding that there are many circumstances where travel is essential or, at least, highly desirable.

Essential travel was often mentioned in the context of, say, customer-facing workers who need to be accessible to the public. Moreover, as one participant noted, no matter where you move such a council worker, the member of the public who comes to see them will always be making a journey too unless council-public interactions can be shifted to remote means.

Essential travel was also mentioned repeatedly by people whose work is strongly tied to being part of a team. In these cases, people often felt that working in the same location as their colleagues was a necessity.

However, by far the most common discussion of where travel is necessary – raised spontaneously in every focus group – concerned the additional value of a face-to-face meeting over and above the nominal business of that meeting. Specifically, face-to-face meetings were seen as vitally important for building and maintaining relationships with other people – whether these are colleagues, representatives of external organizations or members of the public. Many participants talked about how important is the “chemistry and rapport” that arises from face-to-face meetings, and how trust is established by the sorts of non-verbal signals and informal cues that are lost in remote meetings. This issue was also discussed in relation to people’s experiences of tele- and videoconferencing: even amongst those who have had positive experiences of these methods, there was a realisation that such meetings remove important non-verbal channels of communication and tend as a result to be more stilted, effortful and fatiguing. Similarly, because remote meetings tend to be more formal and focused, they were felt to reduce the opportunities for more casual (but still important) discussion before and after a meeting.

Another situation where physical presence is highly desirable – discussed particularly by the Kent managers, although other groups touched on this issue – arises because local authorities are answerable to the public. Some participants felt that personal visits to a site or neighbourhood, particularly when a problem has arisen, can be a powerful signal that the council takes the public’s concerns seriously. An attempt to address such issues remotely might be perceived as something of a snub.

All these points notwithstanding, however, the groups were clear that although physical presence has many benefits, it is not essential all the time. Several times, it was suggested that ongoing relationships might be managed with an initial face-to-face meeting that then moves to remote meetings, with only occasional physical meetings thereafter (e.g., annually) to maintain the relationship.

2. Cultures of presenteeism

Every focus group mentioned the problem of how a person’s efforts should be monitored or managed when that person is not physically present. This was in the context of a culture of presenteeism, whereby many participants (but not all) worried that they were seen as not working properly if they were not physically visible. However, this issue was discussed quite differently by workers and managers.

It should first be noted that many of the managers who took part in these groups – although not all – said that they were comfortable with their staff working remotely, at least on occasion. However, when the workers were questioned, although a minority said that they currently worked remotely without issues, in more than one site workers felt quite strongly that they were not trusted to work where their managers could not monitor them, and that this led to negative feelings (conversely, workers who were allowed to work remotely said that this expression of trust made them feel good). Although this next comment is speculative, the resentment at not being trusted to work without immediate supervision might perhaps be explained to some extent by a feeling expressed by several workers, who said that they were more efficient when working remotely (e.g., they were less distracted, or they actually worked their allotted hours plus the time they would otherwise have spent travelling). It would not be surprising if somebody who feels they serve their employer better when working remotely would be nonplussed by this being refused.

(Although again this is somewhat speculative, the above issue might represent a wider concern than

simple presenteeism. In one site, the discussion of needing to be physically present in the office segued into a discussion of over-zealous internet content filtering, perhaps suggesting that the issue of managers' (perceived) lack of trust is broader than just whether a person is working.)

Either way, many of the workers (and some of the managers) raised the distinction between *time* and *task*: there was an awareness that just because somebody is present at their desk they might not be working, and that performance targets might therefore focus more clearly on the tasks a person completes and not on the time they spend doing them (as one Bristol participant phrased it, "Work is what you do, not where you do it"). Such an approach would allow clear monitoring of a person's performance whilst much more readily facilitating flexible remote or nomadic working.

Conversely, some managers – particularly in Kent – expressed the reverse view: they felt that their staff didn't trust their managers to manage remotely, such that if a manager wasn't physically present some staff felt that there was nobody to whom questions could be addressed, even if the manager had explicitly said that they could be contacted with questions by email or telephone.

Another issue raised – particularly in Kent – concerned a different form of presenteeism in which too many people were expected to attend too many meetings. This seemed particularly to be mentioned with regard to managers: participants cited examples of multiple managers going to the same meetings when perhaps this was unnecessary. Better recording and dissemination of minutes was suggested as a remedy.

3. The need for flexibility

Flexibility was mentioned quite frequently and in more than one context. On the one hand, several participants who currently had some opportunities to work remotely stressed how important it was to them that this decision could be made at short notice, to suit the immediate demands of their current tasks and personal circumstances. They felt that if a day spent working at home had to be arranged several days in advance then this was not really worthwhile.

Another aspect of flexibility that was raised – particular in Dorset – was the value people attribute to flexitime working. The opportunity to shift travel times, and to accrue extra work hours that can be taken as time off, seemed highly valued. Participants discussed how this sort of arrangement was particularly useful for dealing with such issues as childcare and congestion.

However, a note of caution about flexible working was raised in more than one meeting. Some people were concerned that one person's flexibility can have negative effects on others. For example, a person who decides to arrive at the office late and go home late might leave their colleagues having to answer their telephone when somebody calls. "Flexible working for some is pressure on others" as somebody put it, which suggests that the implementation of flexible working practices might need to be handled carefully. In particular, it might be that opportunities for flexible working should be available equally to all members of a group, when that is possible, such that each has equal access to the benefits.

That said, however, when one group discussed the implementation of flexible working the view was expressed that, although flexible arrangements made with specific managers had worked well in the past, this was undermined when Human Resources tried to formalize the arrangement.

4. The role of information technology (IT)

Participants had clearly had mixed experiences to date with IT solutions intended to support alternatives to travel. That said, there was a clear appetite for IT solutions that might help reduce travel in the future, particularly to facilitate home, hub and nomadic solutions.¹ In particular, many participants felt that remote access to information would greatly reduce the need for physical presence and would also reduce paper the amount of paper that is used. However, enthusiasm for technology was hampered to some extent by experiences with IT departments, which were seen as overly risk averse and not helpful at providing remote access to information and systems.

¹ Participants were generally aware of, and discussed the distinctions between, these various forms of remote working and mostly saw value in each, subject to certain provisos such as worrying about possible isolation when working from home. Hubs and nomadic working (i.e., being able to work in any council building on a flexible basis) were mentioned more than once as a solution to the issue of letting people work remotely without each person heating and lighting their own house.

There is clearly a cost associated with providing more IT access, but the groups differed in how they viewed this. Some groups – particularly managerial groups – talked about how it would be necessary to demonstrate the business case for these measures. Other groups talked about how, as IT potentially made them more productive workers, the cost should be covered by the authorities. This included such costs as home broadband access.

Certain existing IT solutions were found to be unhelpful owing to their lack of flexibility (cf. Theme 3). In particular, several people made negative comments about videoconferencing facilities housed in specific rooms that needed to be booked in advance. Leaving aside any issues with the technology of videoconferencing, this need to book in advance and congregate in specific rooms seemed considerably to reduce the appeal of videoconferencing for participants as it retained many of the same inconveniences as travelling to a meeting. A Skype-like solution might be better, although some participants expressed concern about using such systems in open-plan offices.

Several groups suggested that currently a barrier to the greater use of IT is lack of training and/or a lack of awareness about what IT options are available. However, some groups – particularly in Bristol – got talking about how IT might become increasingly normal and utilised as younger people advance through the organizations.

5. Preplanning

The issue of planning ahead, to avoid unnecessary travel, was raised more than once. Two main ideas about planning meetings and appointments were discussed and endorsed by the groups. The first idea was that there should be more thought before meetings about the extent to which they are really necessary and, if they are, whether all the attendees really need to be there. As mentioned earlier, better minuting of meetings (and dissemination thereof) was also raised as a way of reducing the need for so many people to attend.

The second idea – raised particularly by the two Bristol groups – was that there is scope for more planning before trips are made to see whether other tasks could be completed at the same time (“two birds with one stone”). In particular, it was felt that there was scope for more collaboration across local authority departments such that if a person is visiting a given location, there ought to be a mechanism whereby they could check whether any other tasks could be done whilst they are there. Photography was mentioned particularly in this context. For example, somebody from an educational team might, whilst visiting a school, be able to take photographs that would save somebody from the buildings team a visit to check whether a job had been completed.

Survey recommendations

Given the themes to emerge from these groups, we suggest adding items like the following to the surveys. This is not an exhaustive list – this will need to be drawn up at the survey design stage – but shows some of the key items we feel might be measured given the subjects raised in these groups.

- ⤴ “I have to go to a lot of unnecessary meetings”
- ⤴ “There’s no way to replace face-to-face meetings”
- ⤴ “I could easily reduce the amount I travel for my work”
- ⤴ “Being seen in the flesh, by the public, is an important part of my job”
- ⤴ “I could make more use of video- or teleconferencing to avoid travelling to meetings”
- ⤴ “I could do much more work away from the office if I were allowed to” [workers]
- ⤴ “My manager assumes I’m not working if they can’t see me” [workers]
- ⤴ “My colleagues assume I’m not working if they can’t see me”
- ⤴ “The people I manage struggle if I’m not physically present” [managers]
- ⤴ “I’ve got the flexibility to choose for myself how and where I get my work done”
- ⤴ “When other people work away from the office, this affects my workload”
- ⤴ “I would like more flexibility to choose how and where I get my work done”
- ⤴ “I could cut out more journeys if I had the necessary computer support”
- ⤴ “I like using telephone conferencing”

- ⤴ "I like using video conferencing"
- ⤴ "If we all thought ahead more, we could cut out a lot of journeys"
- ⤴ "I like the separation between home and work and do not want to blur this"