

Ipsos MORI Executive Summary of Key Findings¹

This summary contains findings from deliberative research carried out by the Ipsos/MORI Social Research Institute on behalf of Reading Independent Transport Commission. The fieldwork consisted of one half-day deliberative event held at Reading Civic Centre in May 2008 with 20 participants from the Reading area. The aim of the exercise was to understand better the perceptions of Reading residents on a range of emerging issues.

The six areas discussed were:

- Transport concerns in Reading
- The cost of public transport
- Prioritising means of transport in Reading
- Road charging / road pricing
- The third Thames crossing
- Communications between the public and Council

Key findings of the research are summarised below.

Transport concerns in Reading

The research found that congestion is perceived to be a major problem in Reading due to the growth of the town, its role as a home for many large businesses and its geographical location. Congestion in the town is seen as a major problem, particularly at peak times, as well as on Saturdays. This has significant impacts on the lives of people who live in and around Reading and their travel decisions. There was a perception that the traffic situation will only get worse in the coming years unless efforts are made to improve the situation.

The research discovered that as well as creating travel difficulties for people in Reading, congestion also gave rise to concerns about pollution and the effect that this had on the local (and global) environment. Additionally, consequences related to physical health and personal safety on the roads were also major concerns. The research also revealed that some residents were worried that Reading's traffic problems could also adversely affect the local economy.

These problems were not likely to fix themselves and it would be necessary to incentivise people by improving public transport and conditions for cyclists and pedestrians in order to change their behaviour.

Prioritising and the cost of public transport

The perception was that the car has current priority in Reading but that priority should actually be given to cyclists, pedestrians and buses. In order to achieve this there is a need for cycling and walking within Reading to be made safer and cyclists in particular need to be given more protection from other road users. However, there is not necessarily the room to create more cycle or bus lanes so realistic opportunities for improvement may be limited.

¹ The Ipsos MORI report can be found in full at <http://www.reading.gov.uk/transportcommission>

In order to increase use of buses it was suggested that both cheaper fares and better ticketing options could be utilised. For many people, finding the exact change can be a barrier to the hop on, hop off level of usability that people want. Schemes such as the London Oyster card are viewed as a good solution to this problem and can also help in reducing fares.

Other methods of raising levels of usage could come from employers encouraging staff to use buses through subsidised tickets and improving the park and ride facilities. However, there is a general perception that a raise in council tax to fund these schemes would not be popular.

Road pricing

The research discovered that there was a general level of scepticism surrounding road pricing and that, initially, residents would not be in favour of the idea. However, this is largely borne from a perception that road pricing is always a flat fee applied uniformly to all motorists and opinions soften when people are provided with alternative pricing systems, such as driving in bus lanes and only charging on particular roads or by types of vehicle. There is some concern that any scheme could just relocate a problem from one area to another as people try to avoid the charge and therefore any scheme would need to pay particular attention to these concerns.

However, such a scheme could have many potential benefits, not least of which would be to improve the situation for pedestrians, cyclists and buses. There was some concern that groups could be negatively affected and particular attention needs to be paid to those on low incomes, key workers, the elderly and disabled people. The scheme may also hurt small business in the area who would struggle to meet the additional burden and lose custom to other towns without road pricing such as Basingstoke.

Third Thames crossing

The third Thames crossing has the potential to reduce traffic in the town centre and to redistribute it to other areas which would improve the conditions for pedestrians, cyclists and buses. However, this drop in congestion could lead to an increase in overall traffic, as road users perceive journeys by car to be easier and this could lead to a congested town centre again within a short time period.

Tolling was the most popular option to pay for the new bridge with negative feeling towards council tax funds being used for the development. The cost should be carried by those who make most use of the crossings but in order to make sure that traffic uses the new bridge there would possibly be the need to toll the other bridges as well. Whilst this would be seen as unpopular, charging only at particular times of day or only for certain types of vehicle could lead to greater support.

Communications between the public and the Council

Most participants knew the general transport issues that Reading was currently facing but most people were not aware of the intricacies of these matters. However, for those who were willing to dig a little deeper the information was easily available. There were a number of ways suggested to improve awareness for these issues such as having a display in the town centre, and encouraging employers to disseminate information. However, the clarity of the message was cited frequently as the most important element of any Council communication.