

Independent Transport Commission

Report for Reading Borough Council: Executive Summary

1. The Independent Transport Commission was set up in the wake of the controversy surrounding Reading Borough Council's proposal to change the town's Inner Distribution Road (IDR) from two-way to one-way working. The Commission is independent of, but reports to, the Council and has a remit to look not just at the IDR proposal, but at a number of wider questions relating to transport and traffic in the town.
2. The Commission has taken both written and oral evidence from a wide range of individuals, groups and organisations. In order to test some emerging themes from the inquiry, Ipsos MORI was tasked to undertake further qualitative research with 20 representative participants from across the Reading area. Throughout we have tried to operate with maximum transparency; all our hearings have been held in public and all evidence submitted to us is available in full on the Commission's website.
3. From the evidence presented, it is hard to see any letup in the development pressures in and around Reading in the coming years. This has significant implications for future traffic and congestion levels in the town, and means that 'doing nothing' is not a viable option for the Council. Urban areas like Reading are expected to accommodate more homes per square mile than larger, more rural, ones. While much of the traffic congestion and other demand for infrastructure is focused on Reading town centre, growth is also being generated well beyond RBC's own boundaries. Greater Reading has been designated a 'Diamond for Growth' by Whitehall-backed regional policy-makers, and much of that growth is likely to occur within the Reading urban area but in the authorities immediately surrounding Reading itself.
4. It is very difficult for Reading to direct its own destiny. The Council is responsible only for a tightly-bounded administrative district within the wider urban area. The three other local authorities responsible for the 'city-region' are very different, demographically and in terms of land use, from Reading. Voters' needs are paramount in a democracy, so it is likely that these neighbouring authorities will place a higher priority on the needs of their rural and semi-rural hinterlands than on those parts of the Reading urban area that happen to lie within their borders. There are good democratic reasons for this.
5. The funding issue is similarly important. Because of the British system of taxation and expenditure control, Reading cannot benefit directly from economic growth within its area, as its revenue support grant is removed £-for-£ as its council tax base increases. Reading will only receive additional resources if the Government allocates them. National priority has in recent years been concentrated on reviving the economies of Midland and Northern cities and of London, so much new investment has gone to them. Transport capital expenditure, so crucial to the Reading urban area, grew by 12 per cent in the South East region between 2002/03 and 2007/08, while in London it increased by 76 per cent.
6. The controversial one-way IDR proposal could be seen as a desperate attempt to ration a scarce commodity (road space) in the absence of proper resources to deliver a better result. Whilst the Council has secured funding for some key schemes of national importance including the M4 Junction 11 improvements and the redevelopment of Reading station, other major schemes which have local support, such as the third Thames crossing or the development of new Park & Ride sites, require the agreement of neighbouring local authorities and are out of Reading's hands.
7. There is growing acceptance locally that people may need to change their behaviour, to lessen the traffic problem. Public transport needs to be made more attractive, with an emphasis on greater reliability and better ticketing options – again national policy means that the bus service cannot run at a loss. A growing proportion of Reading's population lives within walking distance of the pedestrianised town centre and walking should be encouraged. Although the Commission does not believe cycling is likely to achieve a 'modal shift' without a change in national attitudes, it too could be given a higher priority by the Council. Finally, Reading and its sub-regional neighbours should urgently examine the case for managing demand by road pricing to influence driver behaviour.
8. Finally, it is clear from our inquiry that the public often wants inconsistent and irreconcilable things - safe crossings for pedestrians and cyclists and more reliable buses, but no disadvantage to cars; cheaper bus fares, but lower council tax. Unless the public understands the problem of rationing limited space between different users – and assents to the Council's solutions – problems will persist. The IDR experience points to the need for transparency of objectives and public agreement if an effective road and transport policy is to be delivered in Reading.

Commission recommendations

- i. **Regional solutions:** Solutions to traffic and transport issues must be resolved across the Greater Reading urban area, if necessary through the creation of a Local Transport Authority including areas of West Berks, Wokingham and Oxfordshire.
- ii. **Government responsibility:** There is conflict between the pace of economic growth in Reading and the rate of infrastructure provision. The Council and its neighbouring authorities should be making a most persuasive case for this sub-region to benefit from national funding in support of its crucial role in the national economy.
- iii. **Road pricing:** The Council and its sub-regional neighbours should urgently examine the case for managing demand by road pricing to influence driver behaviour, including the use of exemptions or concessions to encourage non-car journeys to work and encourage traffic with no business in Reading to use alternatives.
- iv. **One-way IDR:** Whilst the one-way IDR scheme had some theoretical merits, there were also some very real disadvantages, and the Council should now formally abandon this scheme, whilst continuing to progress junction and aesthetic improvements where appropriate.
- v. **New Thames crossing:** The Council and its partners should promote a new Thames crossing as a tolled crossing, both to support its financing, but also because tolling offers the opportunity to use the price mechanism to influence usage.
- vi. **Reading Station access**¹: The Council and Network Rail should cooperate to ensure that the marketing of the redeveloped Reading station discourages car access and encourages sustainable use of railway and public transport to access the rail network, including new Heathrow and revamped Gatwick connections.
- vii. **Premier bus routes:** The Council and Reading Buses should develop guided bus proposals for Premier Routes as resources permit with a view to offering frequent and reliable 24/7 services on all major radials as soon as possible.
- viii. **Better bus ticketing options:** Reading Buses should do more to market its current ticketing options and to develop the Oyster card approach (with a discount) to speed boarding and increase passenger numbers. When the economics permit, pricing for children and young people should be reviewed.
- ix. **Park & Ride:** In cooperation with adjoining authorities, there is an urgent need to establish new, attractively priced, "Park & Ride" sites to the North, South, East and West, with fast track buses to the town centre.
- x. **Review of eastern quadrant and TVP connection:** More work is needed to assess the cost, environmental implications and impact on traffic of a connection from TVP to the town centre as part of a review of traffic in the Eastern quadrant, which is admitted to be particularly problematic.
- xi. **Cycling:** More should be done by the Council to promote improved cycle storage in the town centre, more and better-signed cycle routes, and improved cycle training /road safety at all schools.
- xii. **Walking:** More should be done by the Council to promote walking to and from the Town Centre, including improvements to the pedestrian crossings of the IDR.
- xiii. **Modal conflict:** The Transport Department should review, with user groups, the operation of traffic lights, pedestrian crossings and use of bus lanes and seek to explain how priorities are determined and especially the safety aspects.
- xiv. **Bus lanes:** The Council should communicate the range of vehicles that may use bus lanes and review restrictions applied to private hire vehicles and to cycle/powered two-wheelers to encourage their increased safe use.
- xv. **Enforcement of traffic regulations:** The Council with the Police should review the use of enforcement resources and publicity about traffic regulation, to promote compliant behaviour.
- xvi. **Communications:** The Council should adopt a more open and direct approach to citizen engagement, involvement of the local media, and politics focused around the interests of citizens rather than political groups. This could include a more robust role for Scrutiny.

¹ We are aware that this scheme is evolving in discussions between Network Rail and RBC and our recommendation is made on the basis of information available to us at the time of writing

Sir David Rowlands: Expert opinion on the Commission's recommendations

There are no easy solutions to the transport challenges which face Reading tempting as it may be to believe that the answers offered by one interest group or another can fix things. Yet without a solution it is clear that traffic problems are only likely to get worse, driven by the town's continuing growth and prosperity and exacerbated by the Government's development agenda.

There are perhaps five key requirements against which any solutions, and therefore the recommendations in this report, ought to be tested. These are first the evidence base. Do the recommendations and the solutions they offer reflect the facts or just received opinion and prejudice? Second, are they strategic in nature or merely tactical? Tactical solutions cannot fix long term problems. Third, will they command the necessary degree of public support whilst recognising that there are rarely, if ever, solutions which convince everyone. Fourth, can they also command sufficient political support at local, regional and national level to ensure that things happen? And finally, even though solutions may be challenging to deliver, are they nevertheless practical or will they involve, say, engineering approaches or emerging technologies more likely than not to fail?

The proposed one-way Inner Distribution Road fails a number of these tests. It commands little public support. Nor does it appear to enjoy sufficient political support. Crucially, the extra capacity it might offer would quickly be eaten up by the growth in traffic. It is a short term fix, not a strategic solution and the Commission is right to reject it.

Any answer to the long term traffic problems in Reading will need a careful blend of measures which increase capacity on public transport and on roads too, wherever that is essential to managing congestion, coupled with measures which restrain or redirect demand away from capacity constrained routes. And any blend of measures must meet the key requirements which I have outlined. Whilst there may be room for debate about the details, it seems to me that the Commission's recommendations meet these tests.

The Department for Transport plans to fund extensive remodelling of Reading Station which together with other improvements planned at Paddington and new rolling stock could provide up to double current peak capacity. Buses already account for a significant proportion of journeys into and out of the town centre and in my view the Commission is right to recommend the development of guided bus proposals for a number of routes. This is a far safer and surer way to increase capacity than light rail or tram schemes, too many of which have soaked up local authority resources without ever coming to fruition.

Although more controversial, the recommendation for a new crossing of the Thames also seems to me to be an essential and judicious addition to capacity without which the package of proposals put forward in this report will fail.

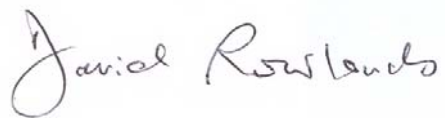
They will also fail without adequate constraints on road use particularly at times of peak demand. The report makes important proposals for what would be a comprehensive system of Park and Ride sites. Inescapably they will need to be sited in adjoining local authority areas. Equally important is the proposal for joint working with Network Rail to discourage car access to the redeveloped Reading Station without which the extra rail capacity could prove to be a mixed blessing.

The most challenging aspect of the report is its recommendation that the case for managing demand by road pricing needs urgent examination. But without it, the rest of the package of proposals will not deliver a long term solution as demand continues to grow constrained only by the physical limits of the roads themselves. There is no reason why a road pricing scheme need operate like that in London. Indeed it is important for public acceptability to realise that prices could be zero for most of the time and for charges only to apply at times of peak demand when there is not enough space on the road.

The report rightly identifies that Reading Borough Council cannot solve its traffic problems on its own. Whether it is Park and Ride sites, a new Thames crossing or road pricing the Council will need to work in partnership with its neighbours in the sub-region. Transport problems require sub-regional and not local solutions. The evidence from elsewhere in England is that local authorities who work together to tackle transport issues find better answers and those that do so find it easier to gain funding from central government. Funding will be an issue and it is difficult to see how the recommendations in this report can be delivered without a substantial national contribution.

Despite the obvious challenges, I consider that this report offers a practical and coherent solution to Reading's problems. The evidence shows that without action congestion will only get worse but that the recommendations, if implemented, could deal with it. They offer a strategic long term solution. The very extensive consultations undertaken by the Commission suggest that a consensus can be built amongst the public for the report's conclusions. But the report is right to stress the communications challenge. A political consensus is equally challenging but it is vital not just to Reading but to the whole sub-region. The proposals are practical and deliverable.

Finally they represent a package. It might be tempting to select some recommendations and leave others aside. It is not difficult to pick out just public transport and walking and cycling, on which the report makes some sensible suggestions, because of their easy acceptability. But a partial answer will prove no answer to traffic congestion. The report offers an answer to Reading's problems but only, it seems to me, if basically accepted in full.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "David Rowlands". The ink is dark and the handwriting is fluid and legible.

Sir David Rowlands
Former Permanent Secretary at the Department for Transport