VIEWPOINT

Our society is ageing: is anyone thinking what this means for transport provision?

Giles Bailey

Strategeeb Ltd

Our society is ageing. This should be a source of great pride to all of us as individuals as we are improving the health and well-being of a large segment of the population who in earlier generations would have died much earlier. However, as transport professionals we need to recognise how the transport system will need to adapt to the increasing numbers of older people, some of whom will continue to be quite active, whilst others will be very old indeed!

Just 8% of the world's population was over 60 in 1950. By 2010 it was 11%. In the next 40 years this will double again to 22%. In the UK, ten million people are currently over the age of 65. This will increase by 50% to 15 million in 2035, and double to 20 million by just beyond 2050. That's one in four of the UK population.

Within this total there is an equally important dynamic of the 'very old'. There are currently three million people over the age of 80 in the UK, and this is expected to double by 2030 and reach eight million by 2050. The population of centenarians in the UK is also exploding, from a few thousand in the year 2000 to several hundred thousand by 2050!

The impact of ageing in society on transport has up to now been largely treated as a secondary issue to those of economic development and performance, as well as competitiveness. It is still largely, if not explicitly, assumed that beyond "working age" – somewhere just beyond 60 – mobility significantly changes. We assume travel decreases, moves out of the peak period, becomes more local and moves out of the large urban centres to smaller quieter towns as older people re-locate.

> "The needs of the very old, the recently retired but active, or the growing numbers of slightly older continuing workers, are all quite different.

Trying to focus in on a succinct set of the challenges in transport being presented by ageing is daunting. The 'easy' issues are at least already being widely discussed including making services accessible and how to provide concessionary fares to help those of pensionable age use the system. But there are many stereotypes, assumptions and views from past behaviour that may no longer be relevant. What does ageing mean for rural populations, including isolation and loneliness as well as access to services? How does this compare with elderly residents in suburban car-oriented developments, and elderly residents of urban areas?

The needs of the very old – 80 or 90+ – the recently retired and pensionable, but active, or the growing numbers of slightly older continuing workers are all quite different. Each group will substantially increase in numbers in the UK. One issue is how can we make public transport more useful for older populations? But likewise, following a lifetime of driving, many of the coming older generations will prefer, or even need, in suburban and rural locations, to drive themselves for many years.

The key relationship between transport and other public services needs to be considered in public policy. For older people the lack of access to adequate transport, or the erosion of independence in the use of transport, can quickly lead to a range of other social and health problems. The right transport enables quality life to be maintained as people age.

The Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport recently convened a conference 'Older People: Making sense of the costs and benefits of travel' that looked at some of these issues. Inevitably, the debate tended to focus on the existing entitlements for the UK's older population, such as the national bus passes and on developing a public policy framework to deploy the best practice seen in London to the rest of the country. Differences in the quality of provision across the UK, the efficiency of the operation, or even the rationale for these services and the politics of how these services could or should be protected are all currently live issues.

The reality of the vast public transport offer in London versus the limited and declining bus service in many rural areas of England is a stark issue faced by policy experts. A bus pass is only helpful if you have a bus service to use it on!

The topic of ageing in society is, however, so much wider – and important. How society attempts to maintain quality of life for older non-working and working people while still providing for the rest of the community to operate effectively will be one of the major future challenges, in transport as in other fields. This is a role for public policy, but also for business via innovative service models. Greater use of in-car technology for 'assisted driving' is a topical example as is the development of home shopping services.

The challenges and opportunities of the great change affecting our society by this major demographic shift need to championed and embraced as one of our forthcoming realities. Changes we have already accepted as helping the elderly or people with disabilities have improved the lives and experiences for many in society, as evidenced by the expansion in the use of level access and lifts in all sorts of contexts, particularly stations. We may need to look further at the efficiency and affordability of the current entitlements we offer.

The growth in numbers of older people also means we need to look to new models of providing services. For example, a less mobile population who have for some years worked with, or become accustomed, to internet services significantly increases the need for a much more universal level of internet access across the country as a supplier business model.

Lifestyle and residential locational choice as well as housing design also need to be considered. A rural or seaside lifestyle that was adopted with enthusiasm at 60 may not be feasible at 80 or 90 or even 100 without significant extra services and modifications. How will these new models be developed and implemented, as well as funded from individuals as well as public resources?

This is a huge opportunity for innovative new businesses and thinking regarding public services, but also a challenge to existing service providers and organisations, including the transport industry, to look hard at their offer and plans, to ensure that they are engaged with and continue to meet the needs of a significantly greying but continuingly active Britain. LTT

Giles Bailey is managing director of Strategeeb Ltd, a London-based consultancy assisting businesses think about their strategic vision. He was Transport for London's head of marketing strategy for nine years.

In Passing

LTT Consultants have missed out on some easy money after the DfT decided to use in-house expertise to estimate the number of road signs in England. The last estimate, made in 1993, came up with a figure of 2.45 million. "The 1993 study was based on a survey in which signs were physically counted and analysed using external consultants," explains the Department. "It was therefore labour intensive and costly – approximately £3m in 1993." And how much did it cost the in-house team to come up with the new figure of 4.6 million signs? Just £50,000.

LTT So what's behind the proliferation of signs in the last 20 years? The number of all types of sign seem to have mushroomed: waiting/loading restriction by 25%, speed limits by 96%, bus lanes by 646%, parking regulations by 841%, cycle warnings by 1,278%, and those alerting drivers to speed humps by 2,004%. But the DfT's number crunchers estimate (or perhaps assume?) that the number of one type of sign hasn't changed at all. "The estimate for 'steep hill' signs was exactly the same as in 1993 – 4,613." We all know about the collapse of Britain's ship-building and mining industries, but can't we even make hills any more?

LTT When driving to Scotland, it's not just the changing scenery that reminds you the border has been crossed: the Highways Agency and Transport Scotland have strikingly different approaches to what information is displayed on variable message signs. DfT roads minister Robert Goodwill explained the English approach last week as he launched the Government's traffic sign reforms. "There is a fine balance to be struck between what to say and what not to say," he said. "Sometimes the best message is to say nothing; and that should be the ultimate aim of a variable message sign – to say nothing – as this means the road network is operating smoothly." In Scotland, however, the approach seems to be: 'Well, we've stuck a sign up, so we may as well say something.' Driving up the M74 last week the first sign *LTT* approached instructed us to 'Use the correct child seat' and the next reminded us 'Don't take drugs and drive' (is taking drugs ok?). From a distance the first word we could make out on the third sign was 'Tonight' but, to our disappointment, this wasn't informing us that *Take the High Road* was returning to the telly, but was merely mundane information about road works.

LTT The Welsh Government has just awarded £100,000 to the Vale of Glamorgan and Ceredigion Councils to pilot new ways of delivering public transport. But the rules on what the councils can spend the money on are very strict indeed. In a letter to the councils the Government says the funding must be used for the purposes of the pilot project. And, in case that wasn't clear enough, it adds: "You must not use any part of the funding for… gambling… pornography… offering sexual services… or any kind of illegal activities."

Letters to the Editor

Walking – not driving – is key to a functioning society

Contrary to the assertions of Keith Peat (Letters *LTT* 2 May), the link to everything surely is walking, rather than car driving. We walk to the bus stop and to the local shop. The NHS, like any health service, would be on better financial grounds with more walking trips and fewer car trips. As for car-based retail parks, they are more the reason why the High Street has become less viable/attractive. Walkers spend more per head on high streets than car drivers, the research is there.

For the car to be 'the link' it would have to provide for the independent teenager, the elderly and those with compromised mobility. Instead, these people walk, cycle, take the bus, or engage in the hassle of hiring a suitable vehicle for the trip (be that a taxi, minicab or community transport), or are denied the right to travel.

Adrian Hetherington
Ontario, Canada

A less car-dependent society would be a better society

The Oxford English Dictionary definition of "fanatic" refers to "excessive and mistaken enthusiasm". I believe it is accurate to use this word to describe the adherents of the car culture dominating the thoughts and actions of the politicians and civil servants shaping transport policy, as I did in my first letter (*LTT* 18 Apr). I don't think it is in the least discourteous to describe Mr Peat, and now Mr Francis (*LTT* 02 May), as being on the extreme wing of this belief system.

Mr Peat's argument seems to be that there is a lot of car use in contemporary society and therefore it must be necessary and good. We can, however, live in a less car dependent society and we should aspire to do so in order to mitigate the numerous adverse effects of mass car use I referred to. The history of post-war transport in many European conurbations is often one of resisting the temptation to rip out traditional city centres and insert new roads and facilities for car use, going for walking, cycling and public transport instead. All this happens in fairly conventional capitalist, consumerist 20th and now 21st century societies on the same continent as us.

The precise mechanisms for reducing car dependence should actually be up to motorists and their organisations as part of accepting responsibility for their activities, but here are a few suggestions:

1. Enforcing existing road traffic law. Mr Francis thinks there is no exemption from the law for drivers. If some 40-50% of drivers break the law on speed with impunity in almost all cases, generally only with the exception of enforcement at well-advertised sites, then they are indeed effectively exempt from the law. There is a problem here in that most offences are committed by the mainstream of typical motorists, which needs to be taken into account with any regime of enforcement focusing on the very worst. But the point is that some motor vehicle use (5%? 10%?) would be reduced by rudimentary enforcement of road traffic law. Then there are simple attempts at a civilised approach to traffic law, such as John Dales' suggestion of re-taking "the test" from time-to-time ('StreetTalk' *LTT* 04 Apr), and the current debate about driver liability in civil law in collisions with pedestrians and cyclists, which would bring us into line with European and other societies ('Accident liability debated' *LTT* 02 May).

2. Re-allocating road space to non-motorised modes and public transport. From filtered permeability and gyratory removal through to basic traffic management techniques, these methods are on the agenda in London and elsewhere in the UK.

3. Paying a reasonable amount. Even conventional cost-benefit analyses – normally used to perpetuate the status quo – indicates substantial underpayment with regard to what economists call the external costs of motoring. Basic costs of living have risen over the last few years, with the costs of housing having risen dramatically over the last few decades – yet the cost of motoring has stayed the same or declined since New Labour came to power in 1997. Increasing fuel prices will be necessary anyway to encourage more fuel efficient cars as well as to avoid losing (inadequate) revenue from motoring.

These measures are justified anyway as part of living in a more civilised society, but would have the effect of reducing car use and dependence. This does not mean there should be no cars about anywhere; it just means we are aware of the problems associated with mass car use and try to address them.

A key problem as shown by Messrs Peat and Francis is that the slightest questioning of motorist privilege leads to a panic-stricken assumption that nobody will ever be allowed to drive a car ever again. Mr Peat asks "What are the alternatives? A society based on man-power? Or maybe the horse?" They really do need to stop equating their basic identity with the "right" to drive wherever and however they want, while identifying themselves as an oppressed minority deserving of special treatment, subsidy and exemption from the law.

Robert Davis
Chair, Road Danger Reduction Forum
London NW10

HS2 could prompt public spending in excess of £100bn

William Barter calls the average 170 passengers on a Virgin train "an abstraction" (Letters *LTT* 2 May). It is not my fault the number comes out that way. Of course there is variability, hour-to-hour, but the number is real and right enough. That is why he cannot overturn it.

The idea that the West Coast Main Line is, or will be, out of capacity overlooks the possibility of balancing supply and demand by price, a strangely time-honoured technique, particularly useful where a business makes catastrophic losses, as does the WCML after taking capital into account.

William also criticises the £80bn cost that I assigned to HS2. The costs amount to £43bn for construction and the £7bn for the trains. Tax at 20.9%, included in the economic analysis, should be added, resulting in £60bn; after all, no project is in isolation from the rest of the economy and all must bear their tax burden.

Billions more may be required to upgrade stations and to connect to the parkway stations, the connection to HS1 will return, and the system will, if ever started, be extended. Hence the final bill may spiral ever upwards into the hundreds of billions.

Ronald D Utt, in his paper 'America's coming high-speed rail financial disaster', points out that Japan's high-speed rail debt is $300bn. Should the UK aspire to "compete", then we may well spend, and effectively waste, the same. Hopefully, we are not stupid enough to emulate these lemmings but the signs are not good.

May I also respond to Norman Bradbury? Bizarrely, Norman attacks my suggestion that the railways would be better as roads by pointing out that, "a long time ago he and I had a conversation about my 'misguided methodology' in a pub following which I departed for home, not via Victoria coach station but by train from Euston to Northampton" (Letters *LTT* 18 Apr). Well of course I did. The coach would have taken at least two-and-a-half hours and was not available until midnight. However, had the railway been paved, the express coach from Euston would have matched the train for speed and at a fraction of the cost. Unfortunately I did not have that choice.

Paul Withrington
Director, Transport Watch
Northampton NN2

SEND letters to be considered for publication to:
Email: ed.ltt@landor.co.uk
(Letters may be edited)

LOCAL TRANSPORT TODAY

State rail will be a slow train

Rail renationalisation is back on the cards again, with the Labour party contemplating whether to include a pledge to renationalise the railways in its manifesto for the General Election next May. Like bus regulation, the question of how our railways are managed is one that endures. When the railways were last in private ownership (pre-1948), nationalisation was seen (by some) as a panacea; now that they are back in private hands again, the reverse seems to be the case.

Nationalisation will no doubt appeal to a large segment of Labour's core supporters but what are the practical matters associated with bringing railway operations back in-house?

Network Rail is already in public hands of course. If rail nationalisation becomes official Labour policy and the party wins the next election, then one can expect the passenger rail franchises (but not freight) to be returned to the state upon their expiry. However, this is likely to be a piecemeal and lengthy process.

For instance, three of the DfT's 16 rail franchises will be awarded in 2014 but they will be for periods far in excess of the set five-year parliamentary term: Thameside will run to 2029; the gigantic Thameslink Great Northern (which is to be merged with Southern) stretches to 2022; and currently state-run East Coast should be relet before the election on a term that will end in 2023.

A further complication for Labour is that the refranchising process for the Northern and Trans Pennine Express franchises (to be awarded in 2015), and those for Great Western and Greater Anglia (to be awarded in 2016), will commence before the date of the next general election (7 May 2015) and is likely to go-ahead regardless of a change of government.

This means that seven out of the 16 rail franchises will have been refranchised before Labour will have any chance of taking them back into public ownership. The party will need to win not just the next election (in 2015), but the two subsequent ones as well (in 2020 and 2025) if it is to bring all the franchises back into state hands. There is also the question of what will become of the ScotRail franchise (which comes under the Scottish Government and is not a DfT responsibility). Assuming, of course that by this stage, Scotland is part of the United Kingdom . . .