

# Tread softly over non radial routes

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By Christian Wolmar

The most intractable problem in urban transport is how to deal with non-radial journeys. This was apparent at the West London Transport Strategy conference which I chaired earlier this month. Six West London boroughs have got together to try to develop a strategy for the sub-region which cuts across borough boundaries and the conference showed just how difficult it was.

Transport politics in West London is dominated by the issue of the 20km tram scheme from Uxbridge to Shepherds Bush that Ken Livingstone has proposed. The plan is controversial because its opponents allege that the Uxbridge Road will become impassable by car and therefore there will be rat running through many residential streets. All the councils – which are now all Conservative controlled - along the route now oppose the route though there seems to be something of political grandstanding about this.

That, however, is a radial route and so is Crossrail, whose usefulness to West London has been rather reduced by the abandonment of the leg that was to go through much of the area out to Richmond and Kingston. The trouble with the non-radial journeys is that they do not amount to sufficient flows to allow positive business cases for projects. There is, for example, a plan to have a high speed bus between Wembley and Park Royal, a currently fairly derelict but burgeoning industrial area. The proposers are confident that there would be considerable usage but to some extent that amounts to an act of faith and while that might have satisfied our Victorian forebears, transport infrastructure is no longer built on that basis. Rigid business plans, which as I have mentioned before, rarely make sense ex post facto, are the order of the day.

An even more ambitious idea is for a 25km underground line linking Surbiton with Hendon, and going through all the major existing interchanges. This was apparently proposed back in 2000 in a £100,000 study just after the Hatfield train crash, a time when no one was very interested in considering such schemes. That idea really does sound fanciful. Its proposers say that a similar length underground line has been built in Copenhagen for £1bn and that the geological conditions are ideal for tunnelling in that area, but given the Treasury's way of assessing schemes, the price here would be several times that figure.

One scheme is actually coming to fruition. Thanks to Section 106 money from the massive retail development at White City, there is a new station being built on the West London line that runs between Willesden and Clapham Junctions. However, it has taken years of negotiation with the various railway stakeholders to establish that station, and with 4,000 car parking compared with a 15 minute train service that does not go anywhere much, it is not going to make a huge dent in the traffic around Shepherds Bush – though admittedly the development is also served by two Underground lines and will have its own dedicated bus station.

That example highlights the problem. The growth in transport demand in London and many other growing cities is on non-radial journeys. The real answer is that rather than attempt to provide for these journeys, planners have to think of ways of damping down demand for motorised transport. Keith Buchan, a long established transport consultant, hit the nail on the head at the conference when he pointed out that the first priority should be to look at ways of reducing transport demand so

that people do not have to make journeys they don't want to. Certainly, the mood of most of the people at the conference was not in favour of massive transport infrastructure schemes, but rather a focus on what are dismissively called 'soft' measures. Perhaps Transport for London is barking up the wrong – or rather an old – tree. Sure, we need schemes to tackle bottlenecks and reduce the pressure on key parts of the transport network, but perhaps the only way of dealing with urban transport's most intractable problem is not by building £650m schemes that cater only for yet more radial journeys.