Social Exclusion, Transport & Austerity Measures: When Policy Meets Reality

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Abstract

This paper describes the gulf between policy aspirations as set out in official government documents and the reality at the user level for those who would benefit most from those aspirations. The authors employ a lens shaped by two critical aspects of transport - accessibility and access to jobs - to set out the evidence-based objectives established by policy-makers in two landmark reports. By way of contrast, research undertaken by the University of Northampton is then presented which demonstrates the dispiriting effects of current planning and decision-making that has embedded inequality and exclusion rather than eroded it. The paper concludes in optimistic style by previewing how the spirit of policy aspirations to increase physical accessibility and availability of transport can be met through services developed in a participatory manner and that harness innovation for the public good. Notably, these solutions break with traditional local authority approaches and embrace the third and private sectors.

Key Words: Transport Policy, Accessibility, Social Exclusion, Wicked Problem

Introduction

It is an inescapable assessment that transport policy is a wicked problem. This paper cleaves to both the conventional definition of a wicked problem i.e. that the wicked problem of physical accessibility for disabled people is a social or cultural problem that is unique or impossible to define let alone solve – (Dermott & Main, 2017) and that the embedding of structural and other inequalities by a lack of availability and accessibility of transport is *morally wicked* i.e. that equality of opportunity and social justice are denied.

Without genuinely accessible transport options, individuals are unable to access welfare, education, health, employment and leisure activities or else are forced into the position of

having to spend a significant proportion of their outgoings on transport in order to keep jobs, and access goods and services. In this situation, an individual could be described as transport poor (Lucas *et al,* 2016). For those who require transport which is physically easily accessible (the elderly, infirm and disabled), and for those who may also be in the lowest income segments of the population and are less mobile the picture, can be even more bleak (Titheridge *et al*., 2014).

The complex, overlapping, pervasive challenges of transport indicate, then, that there are degrees of 'wickedness' to the problem - rather than a binary distinction, plausible in other fields, between tame or wicked problems and degrees of wickedness to the moral iniquity that non-accessible or unavailable transport provision or options visits on the socially excluded.

However, the key message of this paper is actually a positive one. The authors are inspired by Docherty and Shaw's observation that, although transport's status as a 'wicked problem' is well deserved, there are many things that can be done to improve the situation. Critically, in the context of recession and austerity, these approaches do not require large financial resources (Docherty and Shaw 2011: 16). Indeed, emerging work which is précised in this paper demonstrates that there is the promise of genuinely transformative impact on accessible and available transport from financially sustainable business models which do not rely on subsidy and the whims of local authority decision-making. Although the authors present a UK centric case, thoughts may be transferrable, albeit with amendment, to other locales.

After some initial definitions of terms, the first section of the paper explores the 2003 Social Exclusion Unit report – a view from the UK Cabinet Office which looked at the cross-cutting, pan-Departmental impacts of transport on social mobility and justice. These themes are then continued as we analyse a landmark Government White Paper: Creating Growth, Cutting Carbon (DfT, 2011) These reviews are then complemented by an introduction to the transport landscape in the county of Northamptonshire – a living laboratory for the engagement of aspiration with Local Authority reality where research undertaken documents the projected effects of austerity-driven transport savings measures.

Transport accessibility positioned as a wicked problem

Wicked problems are inherently resistant to a clear statement of the problem and resistant to a clearly obvious and agreed solution (Head, 2008, Rittel and Webber 1973). The social complexity and diversity amongst stakeholders are features of what this paper suggests defines transport as a Wicked Problem. However, in reality the complexity, uncertainty and divergence as well as the changing nature of the problem when added to the fact that historically no single government department has been responsible for ensuring that individuals can access goods and services, are what truly confirms Transport as a wicked problem (Rittel & Webber, 1974). Wicked problems, as opposed to tame problems which have routine solutions (Head & Alford, 2015), are always a symptom of another problem which naturally span multiple policy domains and therefore regarding transport, it becomes that much harder to find the elusive political judgement for resolution. The changing nature of the problem is evidenced in the government's shift to focus on social exclusion for the first time in establishing the Social Exclusion Unit influencing the core of decision making (1997-2010)

Social Exclusion

Transport can be either an unavoidable barrier to escaping social exclusion or a bridge which enables social mobility, literally and metaphorically. However, the term 'social exclusion' is often bandied around without qualification and indeed it could be argued that it is a wicked problem in its own right. Certainly, in relation to transport disadvantage, social exclusion is dynamic in nature in that it changes over time and space (Lucas, 2012). In this paper, we adopt a multi-dimensional definition of social exclusion as advanced by Levitas who represents it as comprising:

- • Lack or denial of resources goods & services

- • Inability to participate in social activities

- • Affects the quality of life and cohesion of society (Levitas, 2007).

We are also supportive of the view that social exclusion is a constraints-based process which causes individuals or groups to be unable to participate in the normal activities of the society in which they are resident and has important spatial manifestations (Preston & Rajé, 2007). In areas where some of the more socially excluded- or those at risk of becoming socially excluded or underperforming economically or in terms of health outcomes as compared to their peers residing in more urban areas- live in rural settings, the problem becomes even more acute as the number of transport options declines and even walking is out of the question due to distance, time, safety or the health of the individual. The contrast between rural and urban transport options is stark. The Social Mobility Commission in the UK found, for example, that:

> *"In the most rural and isolated areas, it can take an average of 1 hour 46 minutes to travel to work on public transport. The equivalent time for urban residents is 28 minutes, nearly four times less.*
>
> *This has a detrimental impact on an individual's ability to get on in life, restricting access to employment and services such as Jobcentres and adult learning services."* (Social Mobility Commission, 2017).

It is the physical accessibility of and availability of transport for urban and, especially, suburban and rural residents of Northamptonshire which constitutes a particularly wicked problem. Because of this, governmental attention has been focused on it and efforts made to spur local authorities (and others) to engage with the problem.

Social Exclusion Unit (Making the Connections 2003)

The first document that will be analysed is the landmark report by the Cabinet Office's Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) on Transport and Social Exclusion (SEU, 2003). The report was commissioned as the then Government looked to ameliorate the consequences of social exclusion by co-ordinated action across government departments. The report recognised that transport problems can be a barrier to social inclusion and examined the links between social exclusion, transport and the location of services (SEU, 2003:6) This paper will look back at the areas identified in the SEU report, and examine the effects of the subsequent White

Paper, accessibility planning policy, local sustainable transport fund, and findings of PSE study for the identified areas of accessibility and access to jobs to establish lessons learned and where progress is being made.

The report identified a number of key areas that required improvement to facilitate access to jobs and key services and reduce social exclusion. The report generated transport guidelines that required local transport authorities to carry out accessibility planning and deliver Local Authority Accessibility Assessments as part of local travel plans from 2006. This policy underwent evaluation in 2012 to assess its effectiveness, examine the process which lead to good outcomes in improving accessibility and identify lessons learnt (Kirby & Smith, 2012).

The report defined accessibility as the enabling of people to get to key services at reasonable cost, in reasonable time and with reasonable ease (SEU, 2003: 1). However, the report also states that accessibility depends on several things: forms of transport existing between people and services, people knowing about the transport, having trust in its reliability and feeling safe using it. Additionally, transport is required to be physically and financially available to enable individuals to access opportunities that others living closer can easily reach. Disadvantage is reinforced solely because of the spatial distance between an individual and opportunity: if this time and spatial gulf can be bridged by transport options, then social exclusion is reduced at a stroke. The benefits to individuals and society alike are clear.

Government reminded local authorities and others that there was also a need to invest greater thought into planning where services are located or that services (hospitals, job centres, new industrial zones) should have multi-modal transport access guaranteed as part of their design and planning approval. Solving accessibility problems is therefore not only about after-the-fact transport provision, but also about considering the locating and delivery of key services and activities in ways that help large numbers (or specific target populations) of people to reach them.

The report made a number of recommendations to improve accessibility to transport services, with an overarching message advocating an integrated management approach to delivering services between Local Authorities, transport providers and voluntary organisations. These covered a broad range of improvement areas including subsidising

personal transport, reducing crime and fear of crime, improving road safety, reducing the cost of transport, improving transport information and the improvement of the physical location of services. More recent research by Titheridge et. al, (2014) has also indicated that areas for success also include smart ticketing, even more reliable travel information and improvements to interchange connections.

The SEU report continues to evidence the actual impact imposed on individuals in terms of access to employment and therefore potentially denied social mobility, for example:

> *Access to work: Two out of five jobseekers say lack of transport is a barrier to getting a job. One in four jobseekers say that the cost of transport is a problem getting to interviews. One in four young people have not applied for a particular job in the last 12 months because of transport problems.*

However, the report, rather than support jobseekers once in work, stated that they should be offered assistance via their local [Department for Work and Pensions]Job centre, suggesting that job seekers prepare to review their travel horizons with the expectation that they would be encouraged to look for work within a "reasonable distance". It has since been argued that this was a short term solution with the emphasis on *finding a job* rather than the longer term sustainability of travelling to work and keeping that job (Titheridge, *et al,* 2014) as it has long been established that low income and unemployed persons are not able to deviate far from main transport networks and indeed two thirds of jobseekers do not own or have access to a car (CfBT, 2011).

Accessibility Planning

A key outcome from the SEU was the requirement for Accessibility planning by all local authorities. This provided a framework for local authorities to assess how individuals can get to key activities and to adopt a multi-agency approach to working with other agencies such as Job Centre Plus, Social Services and Primary Care Trusts. (SEU, 2003: 4) and clearly stated that accessibility planning should be driven at a local level providing authorities with the opportunity to prioritise issues that are sensitive to local circumstances (SEU, 2003:5). Evidence from the subsequent evaluation highlighted that, whilst in principle this was a positive move to foster joined up thinking, in reality the potential for greater communication between wider statutory agencies was not achieved. In the example of Job Centre staff, Kilby and Smith's 2012 evaluation concluded that staff were less familiar with the emphasis on the SEU policy's purpose in addressing social exclusion and more on increasing general access for their respective service users.

However, rather than suggesting an obvious solution to the Wicked problem, this seems to have added a further layer of complexity in that the interpretation of accessibility planning has proved problematic. A lack of understanding and accountability for accessibility issues with statutory agencies with evidence suggesting that guidance did not penetrate nor was it promoted within agencies (Kilby & Smith, 2012, p17) a clear example of the association of social pluralism in wicked problems (Head & Alford, 2015).

Yet there is there is an unprecedented opportunity to build on accessibility planning particularly with the adoption of the Localism Bill (2011), in re-visioning how multi agency working could be adopted in the 'Big Society' to align the social exclusion approach to transport planning. Relating back to our wicked problem, this opportunity would not so much solve the problem as 'help stakeholders negotiate shared understanding and shared meaning about the problem' with the objective of a coherent action and not a final solution (Conklin, 2007)

2011 - Creating Growth, Cutting Carbon: Making Sustainable Transport Happen

Moving forward, the UK Government set out - in the White Paper "Creating Growth, Cutting Carbon (Department for Transport, 2011) - how it proposed to meet two key government

objectives: to create growth in the economy and to cut carbon emissions. Alongside the White Paper, an associated Local Sustainable Transport Fund (Department for Transport, 2011) provided £560m for local authorities to engage with Voluntary Community Social Enterprises and develop projects and initiatives. A prominent theme of the White Paper was the devolution of power to Local Authorities to empower them in enabling localism and make 'Big Society' work to increase accessibility of transport (DfT 2011: 8)

"The Government believes that it is at the local level that most can be
done to enable people to make more sustainable transport choices
and to offer a wider range of genuinely sustainable transport modes
– environmentally sustainable as well as fiscally, economically and
socially sustainable." (2011:9)

The introduction of the Localism Act 2011 (c.20) further drove home the message of devolution, enabling Local Governments to exercise power at a local level and work with external agencies to meet local needs.

And yet, as noted above, the reality is that although top-down decision-making may have espoused the concept of subsidiarity, the reality meant that local authorities were entrusted to use their best judgement – which appears to have led to a shying away from innovation, exploration and provision of genuine transport alternatives. In short, without dictated and binding targets, nothing happened

The White Paper's aspiration for improving job-seekers' approach to access to work, therefore increasing social mobility and economic growth, centres around making transport more sustainable and to address this through changing an individual's travel behaviour (DfT, 2011). The paper recommends making alternative modes of transport more attractive than the car and regulating behaviour using Thaler & Sunstein's Nudge Theory (2009). The adoption of this theory is now central to the Government's policy method for encouraging modal shift and achieving more sustainable transport patterns (Goulden, Ryley and Dingwall, 2014).

However, nudges are only one aspect of behaviour change, and to effect change, access to work and being able to sustain employment relies upon many factors. Increasingly Exclusionary Employment - that which fails to provide the benefits of stable and secure

employment I.e. better physical and mental health, greater inclusivity and increased material resources (Bailey, 2016) - is hampering the progress of this policy decision. Recent evidence from the Poverty and Social Exclusion project suggests that one in three individuals in paid work can be regarded as being in exclusionary employment (Bramley & Bailey, 2018). Those groups particularly at risk of exclusionary employment are the under 35s, lone parents, the disabled and minority ethnic groups. For a Government that is "Pro-Work" the deregulation of the labour market has seen a reduction in the security of employment which in turn has caused an increase in the numbers of people who are now cycling between periods of unemployment and insecure - often low paid - employment (Bailey, 2015).

Accessibility

A further key theme of the White Paper, accessibility, states that the needs of all groups should be considered in the transport planning process at both local and national level (op. cit.: 22) and sets out the four A's as

- Accessibility (Physical)
- Affordability time and money
- Acceptability
- Availability

The paper acknowledges that these need to be considered locally and nationally but recommends that it is at a local level that most can be achieved in terms of delivering genuinely sustainable modes of transport. Key points to improving accessibility, under the banner of *making public transport more attractive* include improvements to bus services, in all locations (urban and rural), protecting the concessionary fare scheme, enabling smart, integrated ticketing.

To support this key theme, the Local Sustainable Transport Fund (LSTF) 2011, was simultaneously launched to provide competitive grant funding for local transport schemes. In total the allocated £540m budget funded 96 projects across 77 Local Authorities. The underlying aim of the LSTF in terms of sustainability, was to support Local Authority schemes that tackled congestion, reliability and improved access to employment. The LSTF project has now been completed and was replaced by the much-reduced Sustainable Travel Access fund and, later still. the Local Growth Fund. Each iteration brought about significantly less funding

with cuts to public spending severely reducing capacity to fund accessibility initiatives and monitor accessibility delivery.

Whilst it must be said that the LSTF achieved very high value for money for the 12 largest projects funded, *it could also be argued that the LSTF exacerbated the wicked transport problem* through its bidding approach for the disbursement of funds, rather than this being directed by the objective definition of need and subsequent allocation of money. In addition, we should be wary of targeting transport schemes for vulnerable groups as this approach risks stigmatisation (Titheridge, 2014)

The acknowledgement that proposals from Local Authorities who had strong partnerships with voluntary sector social enterprises were favoured seems to add further argument to the devolved sense of government responsibility and reliance on 'others' to bridge the gaps. It has been argued that rather than lead to a cohesive approach to managing transport at a local level, privatisation and deregulation in the United Kingdom has meant that we now have one of the least integrated transport systems in Europe (Shaw & Docherty, 2014). Not only is this system less integrated, elements such as the concessionary fare scheme are unevenly distributed within society. The concept of concessionary fares to prevent social isolation, should not only be available to the elderly or students but also those such as jobseekers (Mackett, 2014). Criticism of the scheme also comes from the Campaign for Better Transport (Abrahams, 2014) who state that the concessionary pass scheme is underfunded by the government meaning that operators are having to bear the brunt of the cost of effectively carrying these passengers free of charge. Additionally in rural areas where there are limited public transport opportunities the concessionary pass is of little value (Titheridge et al, 2014). These populations, then, are left with no choice but to pay higher costs for alternative methods of transport or risk further isolation. Evidence shows that single younger pensioners are twice as likely to report affordability as the reason for not participating in social activities (Dermott & Main, p.72. 2017), with women more affected by men. This is particularly the case in the over 85 age group where higher levels of social exclusion are more prevalent due to this demographic being less likely to have ever driven (Key & Culliney, 2018). In addition, findings from the 2012 PSE Report show that currently in the UK an estimated twelve million people are too poor to engage in common social activities such as hospital visiting (Dermott

& Main, 2017). The adverse consequences of being transport poor, whilst still under explored (Lucas et al, 2016) are yet more symptoms of the wicked problem.

Welcome to Northamptonshire: The Perfect Storm of Austerity Cuts

Following the timeline through from earlier sections of this paper it might appear then that the wicked problem of transport related social exclusion is at last appearing to have some level of understanding and that connected approaches to developing solutions are appearing. However, this does not appear to be the case, certainly within our local county of Northamptonshire, in fact the reverse is happening. We regard the county as a bellwether of a likely pattern across England and perhaps the other counties of the UK.

"Bit of a long shot. But does anyone here live in Mawsley village? Seeing as the bus service has been reduced badly, I'm kind of stuck here through the days and it's getting annoying now as I don't drive (hopefully will be soon). I can walk and am very happy to walk to Kettering [5 miles away], but it seems the only way to get to the pathway on the A43 [main trunk road] is to walk down that horrible road just outside of Mawsley to which there is not a pathway. I have a two year old boy, so this is not an option for me to use as he would also have to walk on the road, so my question is, if anyone knows, is there a bridleway in Mawsley village that I can use to get me and my son safely to the A43" (Local Facebook group comment by a village resident)

The reality for residents of Northamptonshire – no matter how impressive the aspirations of the 2003 SEU Final Report – is that piecemeal interest in alternative transport provision for accessibility and inclusivity occurred on the part of the local authority. Bus route subsidy has been the core and sole form of local authority delivery and an irresistible target for cost savings the gradual erosion of the subsidy.

Northamptonshire is a county situated in the midlands of the UK and has a population of approximately 733,000 (ONS, 2016). It is a county which has seen above average population growth in recent decades and the greatest driver of recent population growth is

international migration and it is anticipated that growth will continue, by 2024 it is projected that the population of Northamptonshire will have grown by approximately 9%; faster than the projected 7.5% increase for England.

Northamptonshire County Council has been beset with financial woes in recent times and has very recently had to be bailed out by central Government (Butler, 2018a) after having to effectively declare itself bankrupt in 2018 with the realisation that it could not balance the books. The apparent £70 million pound shortfall lead to a series of draconian measures to cut spending. As part of that reduction in spending, subsidies for bus routes were withdrawn entirely

In an era of austerity, then, those who are not fortunate enough to have their own vehicles or live in urban areas served by commercially viable services, such as rural communities in Northamptonshire, face a bleak future. The Campaign for Better Transport report on bus cuts, *Buses in Crisis,* had previously shown that in Northamptonshire there had been a 69% reduction in local authority spend for bus routes since 2010-11 (CfBT, 2018) however now with the sudden removal of all subsidies an altogether different picture of exclusion is emerging.

As part of the consultation process the Council's own Equality Impact Assessments (EqIA), showed that patronage on those earmarked services is heavily dominated by the elderly and disabled, although they are also used by others including people making journeys to work, school or college or trips for shopping and leisure purposes (NCC, 2017). Further analysis of the EqIA indicated that of the 375,000 bus journeys undertaken in Northamptonshire in 2017/2018, *two thirds were made by those with concessionary passes*. Breaking that figure down further, 100,492 of those passes were held by elderly passengers and 8,719 by people with a disability. It is also acknowledged that rural areas will be particularly affected therefore in a county that is classified as significantly rural (NCC, 2016) where approximately 21% of the population lives in rural villages, this leaves a significant proportion of the local population at an increased risk of social exclusion. Understandably the proposals created considerable interest in the media, and left local residents wondering how they would continue to access jobs and services (Bloomer, 2018):

"A friend who relies on a bus to get to work from one of the affected villages told me: "This could mean that I have to quit my job. I have no other way to get there."

It is of interest to note that whilst Northamptonshire County councils precarious financial situation has dominated the headlines a number of other UK local authorities are facing equally challenging times (Butler, 2018b). Local Authorities generally conclude then, that any vacuum in services can and will be filled by reliance on the voluntary and community sectors. It is important to acknowledge that community led Demand Responsive Transport schemes are offering a lifeline to combat exclusion in rural communities. However, these services are still operating in isolation and at the mercy of austerity measures, sporadic grant funding and goodwill from volunteers and donors.

Passing the onus for responsibility to Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprises does not, however, come cheap. Significant externalities are generated, for example, new legislation for licensing of community transport drivers and vehicles is likely to cost the sector an estimated £400m (SMC, 2017). The solution to use Community Transport then, is likely only to be able to provide transport to cover essential journeys for the most needy: such as medical appointments during core business hours and this, therefore, will impact on the number of leisure trips taken, further increasing the risk of social exclusion. Previous research has highlighted that these effects are already noticeable in vulnerable groups such as the elderly (Luiu, Tight & Burrow, 2017). Given the number of individuals likely to be adversely affected, this is a highly optimistic assumption. The authors view this as a (morally) wicked approach to a wicked problem.

Whilst Northamptonshire received no funding through the Local Sustainable Transport Fund, the Local Authority was successful in obtaining funding through the Total Transport initiative. (NCC, 2017) A significant aspect of the ensuing *Total Transport: Network Northamptonshire* project centred around the current transportation networks that exist within the county and how these could be better utilised through a governance-led procurement process to bring together synergies while delivering social good (Fassam, Copsey & Gough, 2016).

Network Northamptonshire provided an analytic review of the cross-functional service provision of transport services within Northamptonshire by organisations in the public, voluntary and private sector. This created an innovative approach to holistic service provision that permitted more effective reductions of expenditure, service improvements, better 'value

for money' and increased usage, or potentially, a combination of all or some of these. The positive feedback from the results lead to the creation of a Social Enterprise, SOCIETAL Travel, and further research and analysis currently being undertaken by SOCIETAL has begun to model and mitigate the impact of forthcoming bus service cuts in Northamptonshire.

It could be argued, then, that the Localism Act (2011) has not been helpful in the case of Northamptonshire. The Government's shift in power away from central towards Local Government in this case has been hampered by poor governance and accusations of poor planning and financial mismanagement at a local level (Butler, 2018, Jenkins, 2018). This has only exacerbated the wicked problem through the inevitable increase in social exclusion of groups within our society, creating a perfect storm with the potential to undo any previous good. There is also, as yet, an unknown impact on employment both in affected communities and for the bus companies themselves until after the cuts have been invoked. This has been previously highlighted in the evaluation of the Accessibility Planning Policy which stated that there is no provision for monitoring and assessing the impact of bus cuts either in terms of the transport industry or accessibility issues for other services such as health care or education providers (Kilby & Smith, 2012).

Conclusion

Returning, then, to the wicked problem of transport accessibility, attention should perhaps not be so much on solving the wicked problem per se, but instead making progress towards improving or better managing of the complex issues involved, through adopting a holistic approach to a combination of all or some of the contributing variables these (Alford & Head, 2017). In Northamptonshire despite the perfect transport storm that is a symptom of a wider malaise within the Local Authority, there is hope for change. In the spirit and to the letter of the SEU report and the White Paper's direction of travel in partnering with the voluntary, community and private sector there are hints at early signs of success. The use of a social enterprise to address the gap between Local Authority and transport users has the potential to provide an intelligent and sustainable link between transport procurement and provision. Where this is also supported with academic rigour and an evidence base, the potential to

affect change is greatest and can offer a real opportunity to fully understand local transport needs and develop holistic, sustainable solutions.

The emerging evidence that the county of Northamptonshire is not alone in its current financial crisis, and that subsequent pressure to cut services to the legal bare minimum to the point that all public transport subsidies can be removed is acceptable, raises the question of the validity of current transport governance models, a recent report has highlighted the multitude of governance networks within the UK that therefore make it very difficult to achieve integrated and sustainable outcomes. However unless the in so doing, the quality of life, opportunities for accessible travel and access to jobs for currently excluded individuals will be further degraded and it is likely that new or deeper forms of exclusion will be generated. Rather than just chart these negative effects on life choices and chances, the authors are determined to develop evidence-based approaches which engage with the logistically wicked problems and therefore combat the moral wickedness of a gulf in transport accessibility. Our research has already produced a rich understanding of the challenges, and identified opportunities to both serve markets and leverage relationships with transport providers to reach and monetise these markets. With no end to austerity (locally and nationally) in sight, the era of subsidised bus routes as the sole bridge between social exclusion and opportunity is essentially over. Approaches taken in Northamptonshire look set to offer model examples of how fresh thinking can benefit communities, third and private sectors alike not just in the UK but have the potential to be applied globally.

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