A lack of authority

One might be forgiven for thinking councils have the power to overcome transport problems in a ‘single bound’. But, in many instances, they do not control enough of the component parts to allow a co-ordinated approach, reports Mark Smulian.

There is no lack of potential solutions to reducing road traffic, with smart transport initiatives including everything from on-demand bus services to electric scooters under consideration worldwide.

In Britain, though, there is a relative lack of opportunity for local authorities to implement these solutions because they soon come up against the limits of their powers. An example of centralised power rare is if a developer decided to build houses on top of a busy road, the council would be powerless to prevent – and was later taken over by operator Stagecoach.

Councils do have ‘prudential borrowing’ powers, but the crucial word is ‘prudential’. They cannot just borrow as they please – even at today’s low interest rates – and must look enviously at counterparts abroad who can, as a matter of course, finance infrastructure through issuing bonds.

And this is despite them having what, on paper, looks like extensive powers. The Localism Act 2011 handed English local authorities the power of general competence, which, essentially, permits them to do anything not specifically barred by law. Powers are less wide in Scotland and Wales though, in both, moves towards giving councils ‘prudential’ powers to take on large infrastructure projects.

It is a matter for the Department for Transport if it will, and its devolved counterparts in Scotland and Wales, grant councils these powers, but the crucial word is ‘prudential’. Councils do have ‘prudential borrowing’ powers, but the crucial word is ‘prudential’. They cannot just borrow as they please – even at today’s low interest rates – and must look enviously at counterparts abroad who can, as a matter of course, finance infrastructure through issuing bonds.

For example, allowing the use of electric scooters would not, in itself, cost much. But it would have no power to authorise them since this is a matter for the DfT and its devolved equivalents.

In other countries, things are different and local governments have the financial flexibility required, for example, to impose a tourist tax and use the proceeds for public transport.

We have already seen Nottingham bring in a workplace parking levy and London introduce congestion charging, but city regions need more options at their disposal for raising additional funding for public transport.

Jonathan Bray is director of the Urban Transport Group (UTG) which represents England’s strategic transport bodies in Greater Manchester, the Liverpool City Region, Greater London, the Sheffield City Region, West Midlands, West Yorkshire and Tyne & Wear.

He says: “We have already seen Nottingham bring in a workplace parking levy and London introduce congestion charging, but city regions need more options at their disposal for raising additional funding for public transport.

“Better mechanisms for capturing some of the increases in land value that new public transport schemes can generate is one way of doing this. However, it should be remembered that this potential for this varies dependent on how strong local economies are. So, it is not a universal panacea.”

UTG said earlier this year in its The Place to Be report that transit-oriented developments – effectively what Strasbourg enjoys – “are transforming cities for the better”. Unsurprisingly, though, UTG identified “a series of obstacles and barriers which need to be addressed”, before such an approach could be taken in the UK.

City region authorities would need powers to make transit-oriented developments happen and to deliver benefits that could improve health, provide clusters of economic growth, reduce congestion and provide new homes without urban sprawl.
INSIGHT: TRANSPORT LAW-MAKING

Innisfil, Ontario: a ride-share solution

Innisfil, like many new suburban settlements in North America, was built to a low density with cars in mind and, indeed, was so car biased that it had no public transport at all.

The town of 36,500 residents is about an hour’s drive north of Toronto and had long been searching for a solution to its lack of public transport as it sought to reduce car dependency.

Its problems were how to make affordable and reliable transport be brought to a community dispersed across a large geographical area with a small, but rapidly growing, population.

Innisfil’s town council decided a traditional system using buses would not work.

As deputy mayor Lynn Delisi says: “There would be a big price tag attached to it and it would serve only a small portion of the municipality.”

In May 2017, it introduced what is thought to be the first partnership of its kind with ride-sharing taxi firm Uber, to offer residents an affordable and convenient transport option named Innisfil Transit.

Since its launch, the council says it has provided not only thousands of rides, but given an income to hundreds of local drivers who participate.

According to the council, the idea began when its chief administrative officer, Jason Reynar noticed a resident walking along a main road in winter with heavy grocery bags.

He offered her a lift and the woman described the problems of getting around Innisfil with neither a car nor public transport.

Reynar, as a result, asked council staff to investigate transport options. Consultants had earlier recommended a traditional bus option with one or two fixed routes. But this would have cost the town C$231,000 (£137,000) in gross capital costs and C$8m (£4.75m) a year compared with running the service.

Innisfil Transit was built on top of Uber’s car-pooling service, Uberpool, which matches riders going in the same direction so they can share a vehicle and a cost of the ride, making more efficient use of cars. Uber has said that the council saved C$8m (£4.75m) a year compared with running conventional bus services with the same kind of town-wide reach, but spent only C$165,225 (£98,300) on Innisfil Transit riders in its first eight months.

The service claims an average wait time for a vehicle of eight minutes and 48 seconds and is available around the clock.

In its first eight months, Innisfil Transit carried some 3,000 users on 26,700 trips.

Uber had the advantage of being the only bidder which at the time could offer an app-based platform that would facilitate ride-sharing.

A separate company, Barrie Taxis, holds the contract for journeys requiring an accessible vehicle.

According to the Commonwealth Local Government Forum, property taxes are the single most important source of revenue for local governments in Canada, which each year set aside the cost of services not funded by provincial or federal government financial transfers. The latter are mostly grants for specific purposes.

Innisfil’s experience has no real UK equivalent since, despite substantial service cuts in many places, there are no towns of Innisfil’s size devoid of bus services.

Nor are UK towns, or urban extensions, normally now planned at low density around an assumption of widespread car ownership.

While transport authorities may subsidise public buses, bus lanes, streets with more than one lane in each direction and from most of the orbital motorways; they can use cycle lanes and tracks of which Madrid has 342 kilometres, with another 13km due to be added in 2019.

Spanish motorists must spend speed limits on public roads and while they may travel in public parks (whereby bikes are allowed), they are confined to fixed corridors of less than one metre. They must be parked in places designated for motorbikes and bikes and where those areas are not available may be parked on a pavement provided a three-metre gap is left.

Scooter drivers must be aged at least 15. Those aged below may use them in authorised places under parental supervision.

The city used its own powers to launch e-scooters into its streets, but not UK council could do this since it is unlawful.

Spain’s capital is classed, despite its size, simply as a municipality. But, given it easily exceeds 50,000 inhabitants, it enjoys control over urban passenger transport and environmental protection.

The Ministry of Local Government says Spain’s councils have financial autonomy and self-sufficiency.

This means they can make their own decisions on resources and how to spend them. They can raise money from combinations of income from assets, local taxes, public fares and income from fines among other sources.

Could such an operation be matched in the UK? Richard Dilks, chief executive of CoMoUK, a charity that promotes sustainableshared transport, says: “It is unlawful to use mobility scooters in the UK except on private land as they are not recognised by law and fall between two stools rather a long way apart for a definition — they are not poweredbikes, which are legal, or mopeds.

“Should they be used they would have to be legally defined as something in micro-mobility but that is as difficult as no one knows what might come next. Designers could put electric motors in all kinds of things and so we do not know what micro-mobility might look like in future.

“Ideally, it would need primary legislation within so secondary legislation could be used for new forms of transport yet to be developed.”

Dilks suggests e-scooters could have a role for first- and last-mile journeys if they were legal, but that depends on the DfT.

“It is not straightforward, but taking a head-in-sand approach is not the way forward here – e-scooters can play a helpful role in our future mobility and people like to use them,” he says.

“We are, though, one of only a handful of industrialised countries where they cannot be used. In western Europe they are legal pretty much everywhere else.”

There is clearly an issue of how e-scooters interact with pedestrians and Dilks thinks pathways and pavements might not be right for them.

On the other hand, limiting them to the public highway brings a further host of questions since the quality and suitability of such highways for e-scooters can vary enormously.

LOS ANGELES: a travel card solution

Transport for London (TfL) is the UK’s most powerful local transport body and the newer regional bodies for the north and Midlands may one day acquire wider powers.

They are, though, not in the commanding position of LA Metro, which controls transport for all kinds of the Los Angeles region, with an independent status granted by the California state government which puts it above any local authority.

Even in such a notoriously car-dependent area, it has been able to use this position to expand its Tapcard – a travel card like London’s Oyster – from metro trains and buses to other modes of transport.

It has connected Tapcard to a bike-sharing system and is working on connecting with more than 1,000 other account-based providers, including scooter sharing, micro-mobility, car parking and electric vehicle car changing.
LA Metro is moving towards mobility as a service (Maas) and expects those additional services to be added over the next year, allowing users to have one payment method. This will be a hybrid system that enables connection between the present card-based system and the new account-based system. Tap cards are also accepted by 24 bus operators within Los Angeles County. This has been done against a background – somewhat at usual in developed cities – of public transport use falling.

LA Metro spokesperson says: “This expansion of the tap programme and usage over the next year hopefully will make it easier and more convenient to use transit.” In the US, there has been a decrease in transit priority limited on the bus side, due to economic factors – such as cheap petrol on vehicles, increased vehicle ownership, lower rail prices and ride-shares services like Uber and Lyft.

LA Metro has launched its NextBus Plan Study aiming at reimagining the bus system to attract more riders. It is also continuing to build the regional rail system. Metro, more properly the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority, is an agency created by the State of California legislature. It operates buses, trains and planes and builds infrastructure projects throughout Los Angeles County, a wider area than the city itself.

Maas Movement looked at various regulatory approaches but concluded “full Maas regulation required intervention to ensure policy objectives such as air quality and reduced congestion could be met”. That would mean “substantial regulation is required with either the Maas scheme operated by the authority and suppliers or operating transport services or Maas schemes being tightly governed in terms of pricing and services offered.”

Delegation of buses outside London, it noted, hampers the ability of transport authorities to co-ordinate services and ticketing while rail franchising meant that transport authorities could not have full control over pricing.

Andy McDonald, shadow Secretary of State for Transport, reflects on a recent visit to Strasbourg gave me an opportunity to see what the city has achieved through public ownership of its transport network, fully coordinated with a high-strategic approach to land-use planning.

I am most grateful to those I met from the local government and the surrounding Grand-Est region for the information on which this article is based.

The Cathedral Square – before (as a car park) and after (as a café square).

Laos Angeles’ Tap system works along similar lines to London’s Oyster card.

Los Angeles’ Tap system works along similar lines to London’s Oyster card.

CONCLUSION

Strasbourg has a broader vision than LA Metro of building its transport network on the foundations of a public transport system that is serving its second period as mayor, is continuing that vision.

LA Metro is separate from both the city and county of Los Angeles and serves 88 cities within this area. It is governed by a 13-member board that includes the mayor of Los Angeles and three of his appointees, the county’s five supervisors and four representatives from the other cities.

Bray says of Los Angeles’ Maas: “There is a range of options for transport authorities around the world on the role they may want to play on Maas – from letting the private sector take the lead to taking on the role of Maas provider themselves.”

“There is a chance on the latter this year in London because transport authorities do not control what is the core of any Maas offer,” the local public transport network.

“Dean reason, of course, why we have called on Government to give all city region transport authorities the power to take control of their local public transport networks is so that all the options are open to them on what role they want to play on Maas.”

The UTG issued a report on Maas earlier this year, Maas Movement, in which it said successful schemes could incorporate multiple modes into a single application, giving user benefits such as personalised services, ease of payments and dynamic journey management and planning.

A fully comprehensive Maas offer could mean fewer people chose to use private vehicles, creating a situation where, as the UTG puts it, “usership replaces ownership.”
The tram system has seven lines, all of which serve the city centre and branch out to different suburbs.

In the city centre, at the Gare Centrale main railway station, where four of the seven lines intersect, a number of the trams pass underneath, allowing for a large, quieter, pedestrian-friendly square outside the station.

HOW DID THEY PAY FOR IT?
The mayor used a payroll tax levied only on firms with 11 or more employees. This revenue, ‘Versement Transport’, is dedicated solely to transport investment.

A maximum levy has been set nationally at 2%, and Strasbourg is allowed to utilise this maximum because it is developing a tram network, its population is in the top band, and because it is classified as a tourist city.

The tax is paid by the companies, but is collected with income tax.

It brings in €100m (£860,000) per annum for Strasbourg and has underpinned the renaissance of tram systems throughout France.

The Strasbourg city-region authority, Eurometropole, encompasses the city centre and its 32 surrounding districts.

Eurometropole has an overall budget of €160m (£138m). On top of the €100m from the Versement Transport, €50m (£430,000) is gathered from fares and €10m (£8.6m) from other sources.

STRASBOURG’S VISION
Crucial to the mobility plan is the city authority’s ownership of both the public transport network and the major development sites which has allowed for strategic integration of land use planning and transport.

Eurometropole has overseen a transit-oriented expansion of Strasbourg, building compact developments around public transport hubs, so they are all within easy walking distance. As a result, a city-of-short-distances has been created, with compact, mixed-use development, so homes, jobs, shops, facilities, recreation are all close together and easily reached by foot or by bike.

Public transport facilities have been established in advance of property development so new residents can rely on sustainable transport from the moment they move in, and never get into the habit of using a car to get around.

Because Eurometropole owns the land on which the development projects are built, it has been able to capture the uplift in land and property values resulting from the new transport infrastructure.

BALANCE OF HOMES AND JOBS
Furthermore, and vital to the sustainability of the expansion of Strasbourg, there is a ratio of 1:1 for the number of new homes built and jobs expected to be created, with 10,000 of both expected to be provided by the current projects.

So, the future looks bright for Strasbourg, with many choosing to make their homes in the newly-constructed, affordable social housing, where sheltered tenements are interspersed among the developments to create a diverse community, always in walking distance from an accessible, municipally-owned, public transport hub.

Strasbourg has shown what is achievable, with vision and political leadership.

As shadow Secretary of State for Transport, I want to see authorities around the UK given the opportunity to follow its lead.