

Roads Task Force - Technical Note 15

Why do people travel by car?

Introduction

This paper forms one of a series of thematic analyses, produced to contribute to the Roads Task Force Evidence Base. This Discussion Note is concerned with the reasons why people use car rather than another mode. More specifically, it answers two key questions: why are people choosing to travel by car, and what are the key factors that determine the choice to drive for a specific journey.

Summary

- The reasons people use car are (roughly in descending order of importance): ease and convenience; travel time; comfort; encumbrance; trip chaining (where one discrete journey closely follows, and is associated with another); and cost.
- Two underlying influences are also important: habit (meaning that a common reason for using car is simply that this is what was used last time); and the availability (or otherwise) of alternatives.

Context

Understanding the reasons people use a car is complicated by the fact that the way the question is asked can influence the response. For example, prompted versus unprompted questions elicit different answers, and a general versus trip-specific context also has an influence on response. Further, asking why car users don't use an alternative also results in a different response. Attitudes towards the relative acceptability and desirability of car use will also drive responses, with those who consider car use to be or to be perceived to be a 'bad thing' likely to try and justify their decision, typically responding quite differently to those who believe in 'the right to drive', even where the underlying motivations (ease, convenience etc) may in fact be very similar.

Another important general consideration is the difference between perceptions and reality: so, for example, a driver may say they use car because it's quicker but this is based on their perception of the relative speeds of the alternatives, which may or may not reflect 'the facts'.

Travel decisions are mostly of a habitual nature and relatively rarely involve serious consideration or examination of alternatives. Evidence from the Car Ownership and Use Research shows that approximately 14 per cent of all trips by drivers involve some thought about which mode of travel to use, with only 4 per cent giving serious thought to this question for any given journey.

So, mode choice is not something to which drivers tend to have given much thought, and it is difficult to elicit 'true' explanations for choices. Nevertheless, research has been conducted attempting to answer the question of 'why drive', and a summary of the results of that research is presented here.



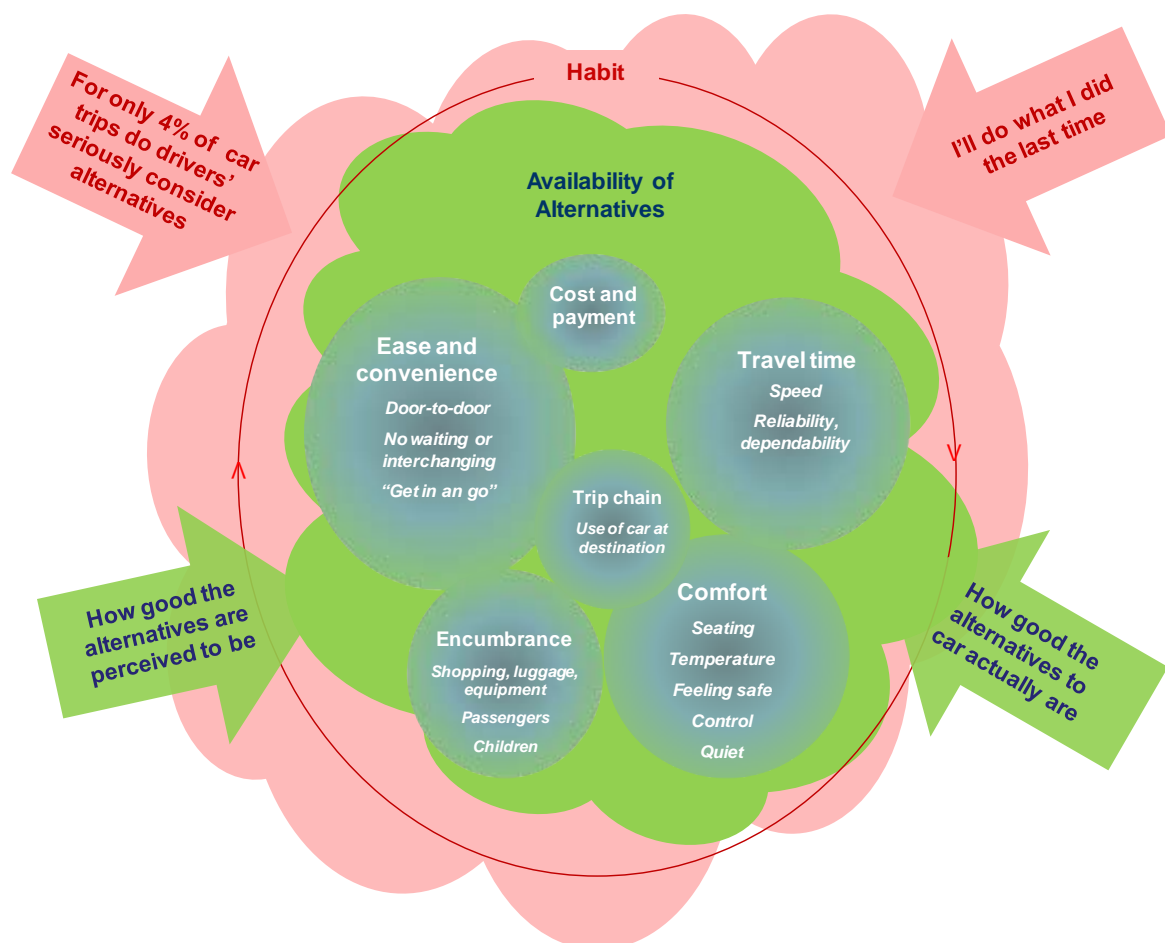
Overview of reasons for using a car

Figure 1 aims to provide an overview of why people choose to travel by car (this is followed by a selection of results taken from specific sources). The categories of reasons are:

- Ease and convenience;
- Travel time;
- Comfort;
- Encumbrance;
- Trip chaining; and
- Cost.

The sizes of the circles are broadly reflective of their relative importance as suggested by the available evidence. Two underlying influences are also highlighted, namely, habit - meaning that a common reason for using car is simply that this is what was used last time - and the perceived and actual availability of alternatives - with the quality of these alternatives influencing how much more convenient car is.

Figure 1 Why people travel by car.

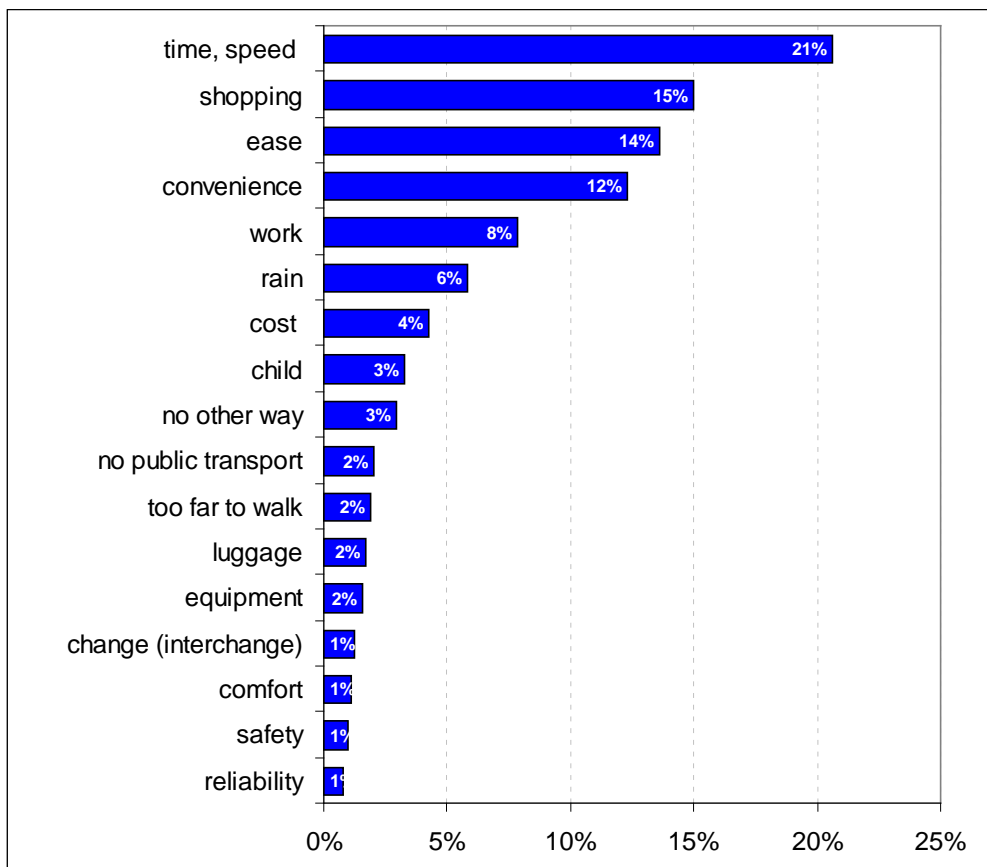


Car Ownership and Use Exploratory Study

The Car Ownership and Use Exploratory research study was a major undertaking by TfL in 2008 involving two consultancies (Steer Davies Gleave and MVA) using a variety of research and analysis techniques. It was commissioned to understand the unexpected trends in car ownership and use (with car use flattening out even though ownership was continuing to increase) and explore whether these trends can be expected to continue.

As part of the study, an online survey was conducted with London residents asking about the most recent trip made by car and the reasons why they chose to use the car on that occasion. Importantly, this question was asked unprompted, with verbatim answers then coded using a word-count method. The results are reproduced in Figure 2, with a selection of actual verbatim answers also provided to give more of a flavour for the responses given, and how very specific some of the reasons are.

Figure 2 Reasons given for using the car on this occasion.



Source: Car Ownership and Use Exploratory study (SDG 2008)

Note that this analysis is based on a word count method, so if respondents mentioned more than one factor then both are counted, while responses not including any of the key words are not included.



Examples of verbatim responses:

“Because that’s the way I always travel.”

“Because public transport was not suitable for this trip.”

“Because of the amount of shopping I needed to do and also the need to re-fuel the car.”

“Because my friend couldn't use hers.”

“Because it is 80 miles.”

“Because I was buying plants.”

“Because I have a baby.”

“Avoiding stress caused by delays on buses and the tube.”

“Had a variety of visits to do in one trip.”

“Someone else's idea.”

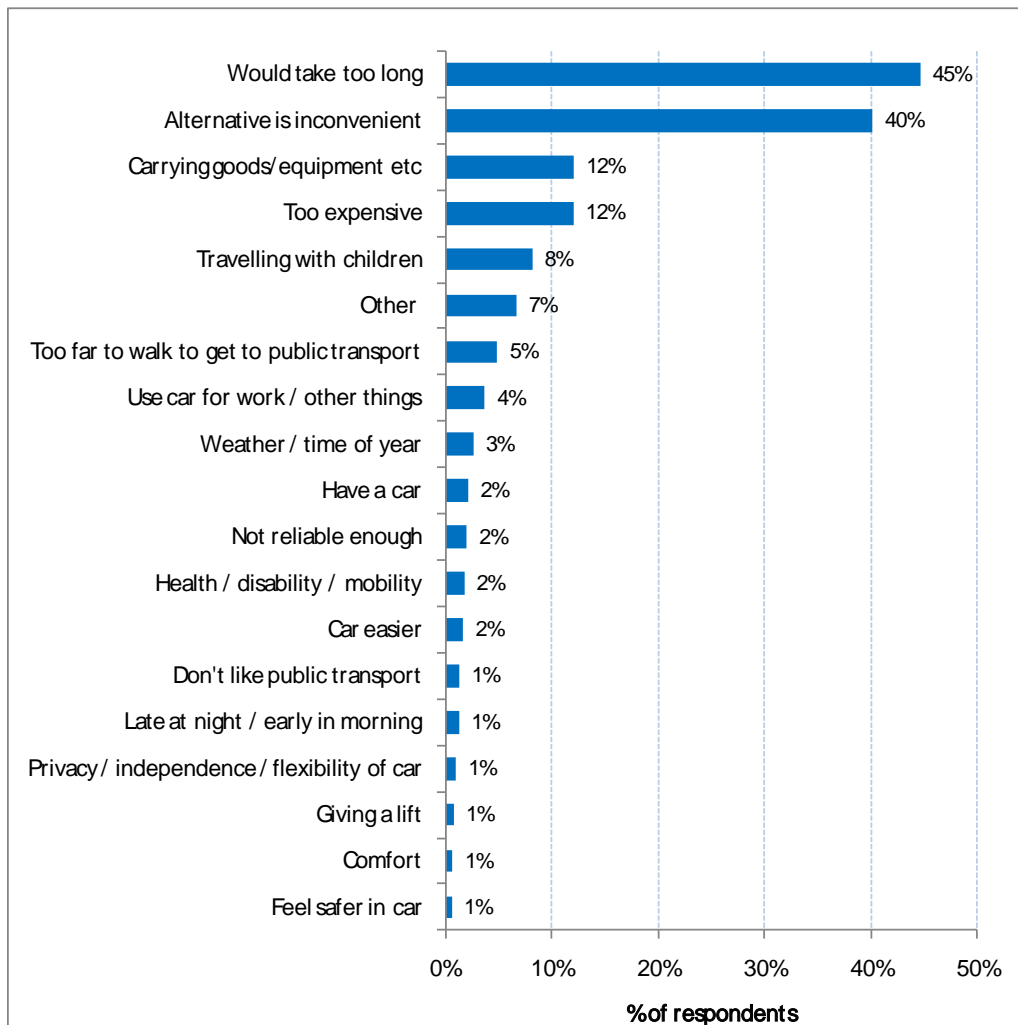
“There is not a bus stop near to the school I attend for an evening class.”

Influence of Cost on Car Ownership Survey

TfL’s Cost of Car Use research (SDG 2010) asked car users about the alternatives available for the trip they were making, and why they didn’t use this alternative. Just over half (56 per cent) thought that they had an alternative mode available, and the reasons given by this group for not choosing to use it are shown in Figure 3. Time and convenience of the car are the top reasons given, with encumbrance and cost also mentioned.

Respondents who said they did not have an available alternative were asked why this was the case and, interestingly, the responses are very similar, with the convenience of the car and the relative slowness of public transport being the main explanations given. In fact, just 19 per cent said there was no public transport option available at all. This illustrates the key point that choices are based on the perceived quality of each option, and not simply on availability; even where respondents describe themselves as having ‘no other choice’, they often mean ‘no reasonable choice’ or ‘no choice I am willing to consider’.

Figure 3 Reasons given for not using the alternative to car on this occasion.



Source: Cost of Car Use telephone survey [5]

Note: base=those saying they had a alternative available for the trip they were making by car

Prioritising Car Travel (2013)

It is assumed that, of the cars on the road, some need to be there – because of the nature of their journey, constraints on those travelling, or the lack of alternatives – whilst others want to be there – the car may be the easiest but not the only option for them. Whilst most people agree with this in theory, research has shown that they tend to justify and rationalise their own choices and thus are reluctant to say whether their car journeys are essential or just desirable.

Nevertheless, it seems likely that some consensus exists as to what journeys are essential by car and which are not. TfL has commissioned new research to explore the extent of consensus and difference of opinion amongst London residents to assess a series of scenarios in terms of how important it is that a journey is made by car. The aim is to identify which factors are the most powerful in driving such an assessment, and to understand the extent to which such journeys are identifiable in real life or can be modelled.

Note that this study does not explore policy options for deterring car travel or encouraging travel by other modes and as such does not evaluate the acceptability of such interventions. It is entirely possible that people may consider some journeys non-essential by car but also be opposed to policies designed to shift the mode used.

Initial findings from the qualitative phase of this study show:

- There was general acceptance that car trips into central London are managed through congestion charging, parking charges and so on; that this was acceptable as so many people want to travel to central London; and that it resulted in the prioritisation of more important trips.
- Outside central London, managing car travel was seen as less necessary or acceptable, and that the circumstances did not outweigh the 'right to choose how to travel'.
- Policies designed to encourage use of other modes – such as improving public transport services – were much more acceptable than policies designed to discourage travel by car, and there was some cynicism about TfL wanting to promote public transport to raise revenues.
- In some cases, respondents found that just simple information about the person or journey was sufficient to assess whether it was important for it to be made by car – for example, if someone has an accident or health scare and needs to get to hospital that is reason enough to use a car, whereas if the person is planning to drink alcohol, that is reason not to.
- But in most cases, respondents wanted information about who is travelling, the time of day, the journey purpose, journey time by car and alternative modes, and the specifics of the public transport options available (the need to interchange, for example) in order to make a judgement.

The focus groups have been used to inform and test the design of the quantitative surveys. Findings of the quantitative phase of the study will be reported in greater detail later in 2013.

References

- SDG (2008) Car Ownership and Use Exploratory Study: SDG on behalf of TfL
SDG (2010) The Influence of Cost on Car Use: SDG on behalf of TfL
SDG (2013) Prioritising Car Travel – Focus Groups: SDG/RED on behalf of TfL