
Evidence-Base Review – Attitudes to Road Pricing

This briefing sheet describes a piece of work commissioned by the UK Department for Transport to conduct an international literature review of public and business attitudes to road pricing.



Background

Concerns about present and pending traffic levels and resultant congestion have existed for many years. The notion that restraint measures are ultimately necessary as an integral part of any effective antidote to congestion has existed at least as far back as the 1960s. Seminal work at that time by Buchanan and by Smeed articulated the notion and introduced the proposition that road pricing might represent a suitable form of restraint.

However, the term 'restraint' is not one that sits comfortably with politicians since it implies a restriction to voters' freedom of choice or a penalty should they choose to continue a hitherto accepted practice. The past 40 years, at least in the UK, has seen only modest take-up of restraint measures with examples such as city-centre parking charges and parking restrictions. Fuel taxation has also been used as a potential means of restraint (as well as serving as a means of revenue generation) though it is indiscriminate in the sense that it does not restrain car use at specific times and places.

However, more recently, significant developments have taken place. Publication of

the 1998 transport white paper in the UK and the resulting Transport Act 2000 gave powers to local authorities to introduce road user (congestion) charging or workplace parking charges. In April 2002 UK Government announced its plans to introduce a distance based national lorry charging scheme for vehicles over 3.5 tonnes. In February 2003, thanks in no small part to strong political leadership in the form of Mayor Ken Livingstone, the London Congestion Charging Scheme was introduced with drivers charged £5/day to enter Central London. This followed the introduction of a much smaller road pricing scheme in the City of Durham.

Research Justification

Further to these developments and in response to recommendations from a series of Multi-Modal Studies across the UK, in July 2003 the Government announced that it would commission a detailed Road Pricing Feasibility Study (RPFS). The RPFS terms of reference were "To advise the Secretary of State on practical options for the design and implementation of a new system for charging for road use in the UK". The RPFS has required a number of pieces of research to be conducted covering matters such as charging structure options, legal issues, supporting technology options, potential system costs and impacts and attitudes.

The attitudes of the public and of businesses are of considerable political significance. Irrespective of a planned scheme's eventual degree of success in terms of congestion reduction, short political cycles mean that a scheme would be unlikely to ever come to fruition without either unwavering support by all political parties or adequate public support and support from businesses.

This piece of research undertaken by CTS was thus tasked with two objectives:

1. to undertake a comprehensive review of the evidence-base on attitudes to road pricing in the United Kingdom, and in other countries; and
2. to highlight and prioritise areas where our understanding of public and business attitudes could usefully be developed.

Methodology

Relevant research literature and information were identified and gathered through two main lines of enquiry:

1. a thorough search of academic and web-based literature; and
2. direct contact with a number of electronic (international) networks of transport professionals, including the Universities Transport Study Group (UTSG) and the International Association of Travel Behaviour Research (IATBR).

Consequently, the review covered around 200 reports, papers and other articles addressing research in the UK and Europe, North America, Asia and Australasia. A summary of each article was prepared and together these have formed the 'Attitudes to Road Pricing Research Compendium'.

Study Findings

The Compendium was then used as the basis to produce a report which identifies and discusses the following key topic areas:

- the importance of trade-offs;
- informed attitudes;
- determinants of attitudes;
- disaggregating the public;
- attitude shapers;
- technologies;
- equity;
- business attitudes; and
- success and failure in the introduction of road pricing.

In highlighting over 30 key issues across the nine topic areas, the report then puts forward a series of research recommendations, a number of which are deemed by its authors to be of particularly high priority, including:

- A fundamental issue is how much drivers might be prepared to pay in order to raise sufficient revenues to bring about significant improvements in the transport

system. This points to the need for a better understanding of the key trade-off in pricing schemes generally between effectiveness and acceptability.

- Much more needs to be understood about the determinants of public attitudes to road pricing. This includes the motivations of people to acquire knowledge about road pricing (in terms of timing and circumstance). It includes how the media and public information campaigns may shape public opinion. It also means identifying the key types of social norms that may determine public attitudes.
- Considerations of equity are major determinants of attitudes to road pricing. Nevertheless, the concept does not appear to be widely researched. Thus a greater understanding is needed of the different perceptions of fairness amongst the range of stakeholders, and how these may be incorporated into scheme design.
- Surveys of business attitudes to road pricing are in short supply. In particular, more representative surveys of business attitudes are required which compare organisational effects by economic sector, size and location.

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The report can be downloaded from the DfT website at www.dft.gov.uk

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