

MOBILITY MATTERS

The end of innocence: helping shared mobility find its rightful place



Richard Dilks

Mobility Matters

It is a truth (almost) universally acknowledged that someone new in a job can ask ‘stupid’ questions. Let us be charitable and call them innocent questions. Not only am I new to the job, I am also partly new to the sectors it seeks to sustainably grow. I have been taking this to mean I can be doubly, er, innocent.

Nearly three months into my innocence, what are the standout points? That there are many positives about shared mobility across the UK is one. New bike schemes are showing surging rates of growth; flexible car club offerings in London have seen strong growth return to that market too; shared bike use can now be prescribed on the NHS in Cardiff; the DfT’s *Future of mobility: urban strategy* makes many of the right noises; cities and regions up and down the land are bringing forward schemes, and are keen to be the next experimental ‘sandbox’ for new forms of mobility. The market continues to innovate with products, technology, and new definitions of services. And market players are anxious to work with public authorities and the public interest, not against them.

Inevitably, however, not everything in this emerging garden is rosy. Here are the most important issues and misconceptions as I see them.

1. It can be choppy out there. Authorities find dealing with fast-moving agendas a challenge at the best of times, but when things are moving in different directions and there is a suspicion that they may not be around tomorrow it gets even harder. The trick is to be clear as a city, region or dare I say it country about what it is you want from mobility ecosystems – have a vision and set the direction – and then work with the market to co-create it. That’s easier said than done. Yet sticking your head in the proverbial sand doesn’t help because

‘do nothing’ does not at all mean ‘nothing will change’. In a world of constrained taxpayer funding and where public transport will always struggle to serve lower density areas, I don’t see the existence of a set of dynamic market players offering alternatives to the private car as a bad thing.

2. We have to integrate to get the best out of what shared mobility can do for our quality of air, movement, and place across urban, suburban and rural environments. To achieve that, we have to stop treating shared mobility and public transport as if they were distant cousins who barely remember to send each other a Christmas card and instead regard them as the conjoined twins they really are.

Doing that in turn means joint working between:

- planning and highway departments within local authorities;
- cities and their surrounding regions;
- public sector transport ticketing and private sector journey purchase;
- different providers of shared services to big employment sites, such as bus shuttles and carpooling;
- data holders and data analysers

If this list feels exhausting I can only apologise, especially as it is far from exhaustive.

3. The private car and the shared car are very different. Granted, they look pretty much the same. But that is in fact where the similarity ends. Shared cars are much more intensively used (meaning much less dead space taken up by parking); generally much newer (meaning much less pollution); and people drive them less than private cars (reducing congestion and helping air quality).

Bike share is a way to get people back on bikes and keep them cycling more; it encourages people to leave any car they do have at home.

And because no one uses shared mobility for every journey, it gives a significant boost to public transport use and active travel.

4. Talking about private cars is something we need to do much more of. Quiz question (nights out with me are an absolute riot, it goes without saying): What is the most used mode in London? Answer: The car. And this in the least car-centric city in the UK by far. There were 2.65 million of them in London in 2018. The good news is that that is up relatively modestly on the 2.56 million of 2009, against a backdrop of a significant population rise. Compare that to the national rise in the

car fleet from 27 million to 38 million from 2009 to 2019.

This is not a counsel of despair, although I think it has been that in some places. You will notice how few of the clean air zones under consideration up and down the land include the private car. Faced with the size of the motoring public, some decision-makers do fly rather than fight. But it does not have to be a fight. People make choices as to how they move around. And those choices can be shaped and people can be pushed and pulled towards or away from particular ones. The more we can make private car use like smoking – expensive, inconvenient, bad for our health – the more successful we will be in harnessing the benefits of shared mobility.

I see all this as opportunity, the thin end of the wedge. We have real building blocks here: fewer young people having driving licences, people are driving less, and the prestige of car

hard to do something we are supposedly all in favour of – cycling. Which is not an argument for bikes being littered everywhere. Rather it is an argument for good regulation and management of these schemes, just what our accreditation scheme aims to achieve (as it does for car clubs). Steps are underway for London to develop a more coherent bike share regime via a byelaw controlling where bikes are parked, and we view those proposals with hope.

Is this the point where I propose a fix-all solution? Of course no such thing exists. Yet there is something that covers a lot of this: redesigning the built environment and the mobility services of all kinds within it (in that order). Design and build in favour of sustainable transport options and against the private car and you not only boost the chances of turning private car dominance around but also of having more useful things (homes for example)

“ We have to stop treating shared mobility and public transport as if they were distant cousins who barely remember to send each other a Christmas card and instead regard them as the conjoined twins they really are.

ownership has been hugely diluted in favour of the excitement and utility of use.

6. So how do we put more of these blocks into place? One way we don’t do it is by being unambitious. Too often the tenders from local authorities for car club or bike share operations have absurdly low levels of provision for shared modes. These may tick a window dressing box, but they are not capable of making a real difference to those areas. Cities and regions struggle to agree a plan of action together, with the result that the sum is less than the parts. Some city authorities even fail to join things up within themselves.

This has to be improved upon. The current landscape of ‘dockless’ (not, incidentally, the most accurate word anymore) bike share in London illustrates this all too well. It looks like a patchwork quilt after a serious moth attack. Various local authorities have reached various arrangements with various operators of various kinds at various points. That is far too much variety for users, would-be users, authorities and operators to contend with and the result is dysfunctional for all concerned. We are making it far too

on the freed-up space, all part of a site that should be a nicer place to live, work or be.

With local authorities covering nearly two-thirds of the country’s population having declared climate emergencies, bringing their planning and transport departments together to work with the private sector in delivering a different sort of mobility for their residents and visitors is a no-brainer to pursue. This applies just as much to NHS Trusts, park-and-ride sites, airports and big employment sites – you get the idea.

At CoMoUK we are currently preparing design guidance for ‘mobility hubs’ – places that bring several public and shared transport modes together alongside perhaps freight operations, electric vehicle charging, a café or community centre. We then want to work with collaborators of all kinds to get hubs established and so build the change we want to see. ttt

Richard Dilks is chief executive of CoMoUK, the charity that promotes the social, environmental and economic benefits of shared transport. He was previously programme director for transport at the capital’s business lobby organisation, London First. Email: richard@como.org.uk