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## **Its time we tried to understand more about what people do with their travel time**

*"Travel time savings are the single most important component in the measured transport benefits/ dis-benefits of most schemes and policies. Hence the methods of valuing them critically affect the measurement of the economic impacts of schemes".* So said the 1999 Standing Advisory Committee on Trunk Road Assessment (SACTRA) report, *Transport and the Economy*. We can be in no doubt then that our interpretation of travel time and the official line on its valuation substantially influence decisions on transport schemes and policies and thereby the shape of our transport systems and, in turn, the spatial, economic and even social configuration of society. Only recently the DfT, further to some very thorough research into the matter, it has to be said, resolved not to change, fundamentally, its approach. Thus, as has remained the case for some 40 years, travel time during the working day is deemed wasted, unproductive time and the value of time (savings) at other times is based on the individual's willingness to pay.

My concerns about this position are two-fold. Firstly, I am not convinced that the DfT's approach is sound. Secondly, I am convinced that the acknowledged uncertainties surrounding the treatment of travel time should be sufficient to warrant a DfT-funded investigation to ensure that our future shaping of transport and society is founded upon robust assumptions. These uncertainties are evident through the range of views of David Metz (*LTT* 20 Jan), Hugh Gunn (*LTT* 29 May 03) and work done for the DfT by the University of Leeds (*LTT* 15 May 03).

To introduce my challenges to the current approach, I would like to share some findings on rail travel, further to the opportunity given to myself and colleagues to ask questions as part of the SRA's National Rail Passengers Survey. Nearly a third of business travellers spend most of their time on the train working or studying (half spend some time working or studying). Supposedly in 'non-work' time, one in ten rail commuters spend most of their train journey working or studying. This is plainly not wasted time. 'What of the others?' I hear you say. Well it's true that they are not all evidently economically productive but I hasten to add that neither is their travel time 'wasted'. Only one in 50 of all rail passengers spend most of their time on a train journey being bored and only one in 100 being anxious. I should stress that views and interpretations herein are my own and not necessarily those of the SRA.

My three challenges are as follows. Firstly, I remain to be convinced that savings in travel time during the working day can be (fully) counted as economic benefit. The empirical evidence above

refutes the claim that travel time is entirely unproductive. However, some commentators argue that the assumption holds true because valuation is not of the total journey time but only of the marginal savings. In other words, for example, the two minutes saved on a 50 minute journey for business do not eat into the 40 minutes of productive work done during the journey and hence two unproductive minutes have been saved. In practice productive and unproductive activity may be intertwined such that a degree of productivity is achieved per unit time. As such the two minutes saved on the journey would reflect a partial conversion of unproductive into productive time use.

While I agree with the logic of basing valuation of non-work time on people's willingness to pay to save travel time, my second challenge is a suggestion that the DfT has a rather old-fashioned interpretation of the working day. For many people their working and personal lives share the hours in a day. So when, therefore, should appraisal assume they are in work time and when should it assume they are in non-work time? An individual's commute (personal time) may offer a pocket of time for thought devoted to work while a journey they make for business (work time) may offer a pocket of time for selfish indulgence. My colleague, Juliet Jain, refers to travel time as 'a gift'. For many people it can be the only time in their day when they are not accountable to others. It is time for themselves – not something, perhaps, to relinquish.

What too of willingness to pay? My final challenge is to question the amount of faith we put in stated preference experiments to give us values of time. I would tentatively suggest that people are implicitly conditioned to think about only some aspects of a journey when stating preferences. From the very top we are tutored to expect faster journeys – see the Prime Minister's foreword to the 2004 White Paper *The future of transport* for confirmation. When stating preferences is it uppermost in our minds to think about the gift of our journey time or only to presume we would wish to get to our destinations faster? Are we therefore fairly reflecting people's willingness to pay when allocating values of time in appraisal?

To conclude I return to my earlier plea – the valuation of travel time (saving) is too important to be potentially misrepresented in appraisal – we need a concerted effort to probe, understand and address the complex issues and arguments being raised and exchanged. I look forward to the prospect of DfT rising (again) to this challenge. Perhaps a first step would be to convene a specialists' workshop to focus the debate and to extend it beyond only the value of time?