

TRANSPORT ISSUES IN CHISLEHURST

As you may know, I advise the Chislehurst Society Executive Committee on traffic and transport issues. I have written this article in an attempt to give our members some background information on some of the main issues and how they are governed and financed. This can be by the local borough, by London regional bodies, or by the national Government. This note may go some way to help you discover who to approach if you have a problem in this area (other than me of course).

How Are Policies Set?

Transport policies are set ultimately via the national Government, sometimes by specific legislation, sometimes by financial encouragement (or penalties), and sometimes simply by persuasion. So for example, some specific guidance is provided by Planning Law on many aspects such as maximum permitted parking provision for new developments and the general location of new developments (for example, major new retail stores should be in town centres with high levels of public transport “accessibility”). Below national policies there is a hierarchy of regional and local bodies that refine these policies into more detail. So in London, the Mayor of London (now Boris Johnson) develops a London Transport Strategy to which the local boroughs (such as Bromley) have to adhere.

Indeed Boris Johnson has just undertaken a public consultation on his revised Transport Strategy for London which will replace that written by his predecessor. But as the main executive body who created the document is Transport for London (TfL), whose staff were mainly appointed during Livingstone’s regime, you may not be surprised to learn that it shows substantial continuity of thinking.

The local boroughs have to come up with a Local Implementation Plan (LIP) that gives more detail and is consistent with the Mayor’s Plan – you can find the last one on the council’s web site, but it will need rewriting soon. It covers such matters as road safety initiatives, tackling traffic congestion, parking provision, coping with projected growth in transport demand, ensuring “sustainability” and protecting the environment.

In practice the Mayor of London now has enormous power and control over transport matters, and the local boroughs very little. So for example TfL control most major roads, the London Underground system, London Buses and Tramlink plus is bidding for control over surface trains in London. Indeed the Mayor also controls the purse-strings to a large extent.

Where Does the Money Come From?

Although local boroughs obviously raise funds from you directly via the local Council Tax, most of their money comes from central Government or via the Greater London Authority (i.e. TfL or other bodies). After they have paid for education and social services provision, there is very little of their own money which they are free to spend as they see fit. So most road safety schemes are funded by TfL, and the local boroughs have to “bid” for funds available under the London Mayor’s overall budget for road safety schemes. If the bids do not fit in with TfL policy, or are not seen as meritorious, they may not be supported at all.

Historically this has meant that boroughs often had schemes that they considered were very useful or important to local residents, but which could have been rejected

by TfL. However the latest arrangements introduced by Boris Johnson give the local boroughs some funding over which they have discretion (£100,000 in Bromley only though this year).

It is important to emphasise that the local boroughs such as Bromley have very limited funds for “minor works” such as road junction improvements. If you want to get anything done, it probably has to fit in with the funds available for “road safety”, “bus priority schemes”, the “London Cycle Network”, or some other budget area devised by TfL. Let’s now have a look at how this works in some specific areas:

Road Safety

Road safety is a major concern to many, and in practice the local boroughs have responsibility for implementing improvements within overall targets set by the Mayor of London for accident reduction, and by local boroughs in their LIPs. In addition Bromley regularly publishes a “Road Safety Plan” that outlines the short term priorities. The boroughs still control most of the roads (other than major “distributor” roads controlled by TfL) and local traffic engineering staff develop the plans for improvements where action is perceived to be necessary. When I first got involved in traffic issues in Bromley over 10 years ago, schemes were often put forward based on “who shouted loudest” or “buggin’s turn” (a list of requests was maintained and it depended on who was top of the list). This was not cost effective. More recently the choice of schemes is based on the statistics of where most accidents have occurred (weighted to give priority to fatal and serious accidents). The effectiveness of different possible schemes is then measured based on estimates of accident savings, the “cost” of a life or a serious injury (yes – there are published figures by the Department for Transport of both), and a decision is made then on whether they are worth doing at all. This is of course rather a technical process not easily understood by the layman, but it does mean that in theory the most cost-effective schemes are adopted, and those less effective are not. This is very important, because with limited funds available, it is important to spend the money in the most effective way!

But the result is that you may have a concern about speeding traffic in a road, but the council will do nothing if the actual accident statistics show it is not cost effective to do so. Likewise, politicians often come up with all kind of ideas to improve road safety, but they are likely to get a sceptical reception from council or TfL staff if there is no obvious proof of such a proposal reducing accidents in a cost-effective manner.

The only slight hitch in the above scenario of late is that the council have now tackled all the obvious road accident black spots, based on historic accident data and hence may have to look at schemes that solve problems over a wider area.

Incidentally the council does hold data on all personal injury accidents because they receive copies of the STATS19 reports made by the police and maintain a database of such data. This should be available upon request (and you can always use the Freedom of Information Act of course if you have any difficulties in obtaining this and other council held information - with a few exceptions).

Traffic Congestion

Concerns about traffic congestion always rate highly whenever residents of Chislehurst, Bromley, London or the UK are surveyed. What can the local boroughs do about it? Not a lot in essence, because major new road building in London would be very difficult (and any road building was pretty well banned by Ken Livingstone).

There is no separate budget for “road improvements to reduce congestion”. However, the boroughs (and the Mayor/TfL) can encourage “modal shift” (i.e. use of public transport, cycling and walking – the latter two being good for our health also of course). They can invest in better public transport systems, more information to help people use them, and measures to improve the reliability and speed of public transport such as bus lanes and adjusting bus stops and kerb lines to ensure they are not blocked.

But all is not lost perhaps. Local boroughs have a responsibility under the Traffic Management Act to tackle congestion and improve traffic flows, and their policies in that area will be defined in the LIP. There should also be a member of the council's staff who is nominated as the “Traffic Manager” (currently Garry Warner). They can tackle problems at junctions, or look at issues such as traffic light timing, but of course there may be difficulty with funding any significant measures for the reasons given above. In reality the Government imposed a duty on local boroughs to tackle the issue, and put in place bureaucracy to support it, but with no powers or funds to do anything of significance!

The Role of Councillors

You may be wondering what is the role of your local ward councillors and other Borough leaders and council staff in all this? Taking road safety schemes as an example, staff in the Environment Department of Bromley Council will produce proposals embodied in reports which are submitted to Councillor Colin Smith who holds the “Environment Portfolio” (one of the cabinet under the “Leader” and “Cabinet” system of Local Government now used). If he approves the proposal, then it can go before a “Policy Development and Scrutiny Committee for review and/or confirmation. Any members of the public can attend the latter's meetings and ask questions if they care to do so. Both Mr Smith and the PDS Committee will consult local ward councillors and the latter can of course raise new issues with Mr Smith at any time. So it is always worth talking to your local ward councillors in Chislehurst if you have a transport issue. Any significant proposals are also put out to public consultation by means of public notices in the press, the circulation of leaflets, etc.

This system seems to generally work reasonably well in recent years in Bromley, with good consultation and public involvement. Council reports on such matters are available on their web site, or otherwise on demand, and Bromley council staff are always helpful in supplying information in my experience even if you may be critical of their latest proposals. But the system does depend on having a sensible person with some knowledge of the area in the position of “Portfolio Holder”. Road safety issues can be particularly contentious with people becoming quite heated on the subject so reconciling conflicting views or explaining why the council takes a certain stance is not always easy. Mr Smith's role is therefore not always an easy one.

Parking and Traffic Enforcement

One area where the local borough still has a substantial say is in parking regulation and traffic enforcement. It is also of course a substantial source of revenue for the council from parking fees in council controlled car parks, on-street parking meters, and from enforcement fines – the latter are run by the council rather than the police as they are now “decriminalised” offences. Which areas have parking limitations, such as being marked by yellow lines, or the extent of wider “permit parking” schemes, are determined by the council via the above process. Likewise some “moving traffic offences” such as driving in bus lanes are now enforced by the local authority. There is a move to have more consistency in parking regulations and the

“viciousness” of enforcement across London as it can vary substantially from borough to borough. Bromley seems to be as fair as most, but there are some issues about use of bus lane cameras and parking bay cameras that cause regular complaints to me.

Freedom Pass

It’s worth saying something about the Freedom Pass – the free travel concession for those over 60 that many of us rely on in London. This is often seen as a “free gift” laid on by the former Mayor, but in reality the local boroughs pay for the cost based on usage. As the population ages and more people take up the concession, and as Transport for London and other bodies raise the fares (typically faster than inflation), the costs have been going up at a rapid rate. This has caused major pressure on local borough budgets. Although local councillors would like to keep your local taxes down, they have little control over this, or many other costs imposed on the local borough.

Conclusion

I hope this article has provided a simple overview of how the system works and who is responsible for what. With Boris Johnson having some difficulties with his budget for Transport for London, it is likely that TfL funding of schemes will be cut back in the same way that their staff have been. This has also resulted in bus fares being raised and services being reduced – one of the major problems in London is the massive subsidies on bus usage that grew up during Livingstone’s time as Mayor which we all have to pay for one way or another. But that subject is beyond the scope of this brief article.

I have avoided comment on particular policies, or what might be improved, as they might be contentious issues that would require some lengthy explanations. But it is important to understand that transport issues are often part of a network of interacting policies and problems. Solving one problem can create difficulties in other areas very easily.

Roger W. Lawson, February 2010