

# **Lancashire County Council Staff Travel to Work Focus Groups**

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## 1 Executive Summary

The Staff Travel Plan Group, commissioned a series of focus groups to find out what prevents county council employees from using alternative modes of transport to singly occupied cars. Group discussions of staff were used to seek their views and experiences of getting to work.

The research consisted of three focus groups, in the three largest county council offices in Preston, County Hall, Winckley House and East Cliff. The attendees were all people who had responded to the Staff Travel Survey earlier in the year.

The main findings included:

- while there was an appreciation of the problems due to their car use, however they were not enough to deter most from using their cars;
- there was enthusiasm for greater use of pool cars;
- the bus is seen as having a particularly poor image, while some complaints will not be changeable, (eg distance from bus station to council offices), other perceptions should be challenged;
- there was a mix of positive and negative perceptions of rail travel;
- a good number of attendees walked or cycled, and saw the benefits as getting exercise and saving money, these need to be emphasised in communications;
- parking is seen as a real problem, with almost all attendees driving in to park on county council premises saying they need to arrive early to get a parking space;
- public transport users suggested radical solutions to the parking problem such as making council car parks pay and display and subsidising council staff who do not use the car parks;
- the majority of attendees had heard they could get discount bus tickets, but a large proportion had not visited the Go Travel Shop, this needs to be better publicised.

While car users recognise the problems with driving to work they are not big enough to make them choose another mode of transport. For example, while the majority may know that they could get discounted bus tickets, they are not doing so. Consider making car use a negative as well as promoting

the positives of public transport. This could be by negative car comments in transport communications. This could make drivers feel guilty, or that their car use is less than socially ideal.

Consider alternatives to the current car parking arrangements, as the problems with parking may well be another means to encourage greater public transport use. The council is not seen as effective with the parking problem and senior officers need to take a lead in dealing with the problem. Communications may also need to focus on the negatives of having to park your car when you drive.

There are still a number of 'myths' prevailing about public transport, particularly buses and attention needs to focus on these. While focus group attendees may be aware there are discounted bus tickets, they may not know how much they could save, going against the impression that the bus is expensive for example.

Talk to human resources about the possibility of increasing the take-up of homeworking throughout the organisation. Also clarify whether essential car users need to drive in to work, and indeed whether many essential car users need the status.

## 2 Introduction

The Staff Travel Plan Group, commissioned a series of focus groups to find out what prevents county council employees from using alternative modes of transport to singly occupied cars. Group discussions of staff were used to seek their views and experiences of getting to work.

The research consisted of three focus groups, in the three largest county council offices in Preston, County Hall, Winckley House and East Cliff.

## 3 Research Objectives

This research was commissioned to enable the Staff Travel Plan Group to better develop the plan and its marketing. The objectives were to gain an understanding of:

- the reasons people use their current means of transport;
- and the barriers to people using alternatives to the car.

## 4 Methodology

Participants at the groups were recruited from the respondents to the Staff Travel to Work intranet survey from earlier in the year. This survey into Preston staff's transport to work received over 1200 replies. Respondents who had agreed to participate in a focus group were recruited by telephone by the Transport Marketing Team.

Three groups were conducted in total: at in the three largest county council offices in Preston, County Hall, Winckley House and Eastcliff. Only Preston employees were invited, ensuring similar transport options were open to them.

The groups were designed to highlight different methods of transport for people with the most option for alternative use. To this end the groups were recruited with the aim of recruiting car users with less than two miles commute two miles, car users with two to five miles commute and respondents who do not use the car. This was designed to investigate the staff with the most opportunity of trying alternative methods of transport, (eg walking for those within two miles, or cycling or bus for up to five miles), and also to look for the reasons and experiences of those who use alternative transport.

A total of 26 people attended the groups. The fieldwork took place between 28 November 2005 and 1 December 2005.

Each group was moderated by Steven Knuckey, research and strategy officer from Corporate Communications. He was supported by George Davies, business travel plan co-ordinator from the Transport Marketing Team.

A discussion guide was prepared for the groups in conjunction with Transport Marketing staff. The main themes of the guide were participants' current transport, their other options, the barriers preventing them from using other options, parking and information provision.

## **5 Understanding Qualitative Findings**

Qualitative research deals with the why and how people take various actions or hold various perceptions. Two of the key strengths of qualitative research are that it allows topics to be explored in detail and enables us to test the strength of people's opinion. However, it needs to be remembered that qualitative research does not allow conclusions to be drawn about either the extent to which something is happening or percentages of residents who have certain attitudes and opinions.

Qualitative research is designed to be illustrative, rather than providing statistically representative data. Participants may hold views based on incorrect information; these perceptions are reported here. There is also sometimes a tendency for qualitative discussions to elicit critical views. It is important to remember that the views expressed do not always represent the views of the groups as a whole, although normally these are representative of at least a significant minority.

## 6 Findings

### 6.1 Group makeup

The attendees were intended to be car users for the first two groups, with other mode users for the final group. However, in actual fact, many public transport users, walkers and cyclists attended the first two meetings and it is likely were recruited because they used their car occasionally even if it was not their main method of travel. This was useful for the groups, since it meant participants were able to contrast their experiences between them.

The total numbers of participants for the groups using each method are displayed in the table below.

**Table 1 Number of participants by transport type**

Bus	Car	Cycle	Train	Scooter	Walk
5	9	3	3	2	7

This gives a wide spread of different transport experiences<sup>1</sup>.

### 6.2 Car use

There were a variety of reasons for participants using their cars. For example, one attendee said they needed their car for going to the gym, whilst another claimed they needed their car to get to voluntary work they do in the evening. Another attendee did so because they were an essential car user and so thought this meant they had to drive into work, even though in practice they did not need to drive every day. There was some confusion between attendees of the group as to whether essential users needed to drive into work every day. This needs to be better communicated to staff.

There was also some appreciation of the problems with their car use; however they were not enough to deter some from using their cars.

*'If I leave County Hall later than 5pm the journey back is horrendous'*

Car user

*'A colleague of mine sits in a queue outside East Cliff for up to 45 minutes'*

Non-car user

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<sup>1</sup> Some people used more than one transport type

*'I would not use the car because of the traffic and parking. It's too stressful.'*

Non car user

Comments such as these could be used to convince people to leave their car by making them feel guilty or socially unacceptable.

The main benefit of the car was seen as the convenience to go straight from the person's home at their choice of time.

*'The car is more convenient than the bus'*

Car user

Two of the groups spontaneously mentioned that there should be more use made of the car pool and some would be keen to use this. Indeed one person suggested the radical step of scrapping the essential car user status and providing more pool cars for people to use instead.

Only one person shared their car with another person for getting into work. Some attendees were aware there was information for people looking to car share on the intranet, though there was a general feeling that this was not promoted well enough. Some attendees thought that there was reason to car share and that incentives should be introduced.

### **6.3 Bus**

With the first two groups being within five miles of Preston, many attendees had the option of a local bus route into the town centre. There was however a negative perception of buses generally, with only the occasional satisfied user.

Examples of negative comments included:

- 'the service is infrequent';
- 'there is a poor rural service', (in Chipping);
- 'buses miss their times';
- 'I don't trust buses to turn up on time'
- 'it's expensive, particularly for short journeys'.

One attendee gave their reason for not using the bus as the 15 minute walk from the bus station to County Hall. Other complaints included the need for an exact fare to use Preston Bus services, and that it was quicker to walk from Fulwood than to take the bus and walk from the station. An attendee from Lostock Hall complained that there were no discounted tickets available for the Fishwicks bus service. Participants from two groups mentioned that they thought the real time displays are not accurate and sometimes not working at all.



More positively, most attendees felt that they knew about the discount bus services and had seen them on the internet.

*'Buses have a 5th rate image in the UK'*

Car user

*'The bus service from Penwortham is good'*

Bus user

#### **6.4 Train**

With the first two groups being recruited from within five miles, none of these attendees used the train. Three members of the final group of public transport users did however. There was a mix of opinions in this group as to the standard of transport, with some feeling the service has got better and that trains are cancelled less, and other users saying the service is regularly delayed. One participant takes the train from Morecambe and has particular problems changing at Lancaster. Local trains from Northern Rail are more reliable than the Virgin Cross Country service as these are likely to have travelled up from the South-West or London and have often been delayed along the way. Also communications were seen as poor at unmanned stations such as Lytham, with only the occasional tannoy message that is difficult to understand. One advantage mentioned by a participant was that the train meant they could finish at a set time. This assumes that there is a convenient train time available; another attendee said to get the train would cost them flexi-time.

#### **6.5 Walking and cycling**

A large proportion of those attending the groups either walked or cycled. The benefits of walking were that it was seen as saving money and getting good exercise. As mentioned earlier, one attendee found it quicker to walk than use the bus. Positives like these need to be emphasised in the relevant communications.

Those cycling generally seemed to enjoy it, but it was thought to be much more difficult when the weather is poor, since there are more cars on the road. One former cyclist said he had three accidents with cars in five years, and now drives himself because of it. The volume of traffic was seen as frightening by one bike user, and the majority of cyclists thought there needed to be more cycle routes. One cyclist complained of the difficulty of storing his bike on the top rack at County Hall. The exercise of cycling was a benefit, as well as still having a choice of start and finish times.

*'I moved from car to bike rather than car to bus because then I retained control'*

Cyclist

## 6.6 Parking

Parking was seen as a problem by the majority of drivers. Almost all the respondents driving in to park on county council premises said they needed to arrive early to get a parking space. One attendee complained that car parking places in his section were taken by seniority rather than need.

A few participants drive in to the council offices at Pole Street, where there is no parking. They parked on a private car park contract for £1.50 to £2 a day, half the price of the nearest major car park, at the bus station. Some drivers also used the park and ride service, one pointing out the walk back to the Portway park is not well lit. Another attendee mentioned that car sharing with another person meant that the bus fare for the two of them was higher than the price of parking, discouraging them from using it. Some drivers mentioned that there was no park and ride service for North Preston and that they would use one if there was.

People currently car parking at council offices had no suggestions for ways to improve the situation. The last group, of public transport users, were much more militant however. Some of this group considered it was not a right to be able to park at work and suggested it was a subsidy to allow drivers to park for free. They suggested that people who did not use the car park should be subsidised the amount those parking for free had saved. They also suggested that council office car parks should be made pay and display. Unfortunately, as this was the last group, it was not possible to put these suggestions to drivers, which would be an interesting starting point for future research.

*'You cannot have a half-hearted approach (to parking problems)'*

Non car user

Parking is seen as perhaps the biggest transport problem for county council staff and we are not seen as effective in dealing with the problem.

## 6.7 Information provision and other issues

The majority of attendees said they knew they could get discounted bus tickets from county council offices, however a large proportion did not know of or had visited the Go Travel Shop. This needs to be publicised better. One person also mentioned that they found bus timetables daunting, and had used travelwise but was not confident in its results.

One group talked of the possibility of homeworking as a way to reduce transport problems. As with car parking places, this was seen as being only open to senior management, and that management need to have more trust in their staff to allow more homeworking.

## 7 Summary and Recommendations

The focus groups have given a useful insight into the problems encountered by Lancashire County Council staff getting to work and their reasons for using their method of transport.

The main findings included:

- while there was an appreciation of the problems due to their car use, however they were not enough to deter most from using their cars;
- there was some confusion as to whether essential car users needed to drive to work everyday;
- there was enthusiasm for greater use of pool cars;
- the bus is seen as having a particularly poor image, while some complaints will not be changeable, (eg distance from bus station to council offices), other perceptions should be challenged;
- there was a mix of positive and negative perceptions of rail travel;
- a good number of attendees walked or cycled, and saw the benefits as getting exercise and saving money, these need to be emphasised in communications;
- parking is seen as a real problem, with almost all attendees driving in to park on county council premises saying they need to arrive early to get a parking space;
- parking spaces were seen as being taken by seniority rather than need;
- public transport users suggested radical solutions to the parking problem such as making council car parks pay and display and subsidising council staff who do not use the car parks;
- the majority of attendees had heard they could get discount bus tickets, but a large proportion had not visited the Go Travel Shop this needs to be better publicised.

While car users recognise the problems with driving to work they are not big enough to make them choose another mode of transport. For example, while the majority may know that they could get discounted bus tickets, they are not doing so. Consider making car use a negative as well as promoting

the positives of public transport. This could be by using comments like the negative car comments in section 6.2 in transport communications. This could make drivers feel guilty, or that their car use is less than socially ideal.

Consider alternatives to the current car parking arrangements, as the problems with parking may well be another means to encourage greater public transport use. The council is not seen as effective with the parking problem and senior officers need to take a lead in dealing with the problem. While spaces are reserved for senior managers, lower grade officers may see no need to change from car use. Also there are other issues here, for example, county council offices having no visitor parking does not give the impression of the council being an open organisation. Communications may also need to focus on the negatives of having to park your car when you drive. Consider highlighting the number of employees in Preston to the number of spaces to draw attention to the problem and discourage its use.

There are still a number of 'myths' prevailing about public transport, particularly buses and attention needs to focus on these. While focus group attendees may be aware there are discounted bus tickets, they may not know how much they could save, going against the impression that the bus is expensive for example.

Talk to human resources about the possibility of increasing the takeup of homeworking throughout the organisation. Also clarify whether essential car users need to drive in to work, and indeed whether many essential car users need the status.