

Planning for freight in major urban infrastructure projects

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Extended abstract

Objectives and motivation

Cities are involved in major infrastructure decisions. Some of this is directly related to transport - for example building new metro systems or developing major interchanges such as railway stations and air terminals. On the other hand many major urban regeneration schemes are not directly concerned with transport (freight or passenger) and yet it is clear that such projects will have significant implications for transport in terms of both future demand patterns connected to the flows of people and goods and in the opportunity to ensure that freight issues are addressed from the start of a development.

However, it is clear that in many cases freight is a minor consideration in these urban infrastructure projects. Recent work we have carried out in London has considered the opportunity to use major investment in railway station capacity to consider whether such redeveloped stations could play a part as urban freight hubs. The result of the research has highlighted that there are indeed some important opportunities. But the research has also shown that freight has not featured strongly in the thinking about the investment nor in the more detailed planning of these new developments. It is important to understand why freight is not considered when major infrastructure initiatives are being devised. If freight is ignored or treated as an afterthought then important opportunities to reduce the impact of freight on the urban environment and to ensure that freight operations can be managed efficiently will be missed.

There are a number of possible reasons why freight considerations do not feature strongly in such major infrastructure planning:

- i. There is limited work to demonstrate the value or importance of freight activity to a city - most work on urban freight considers the negative impact and looks at freight as a cost - this approach means that freight is typically seen as a necessary evil and not really something where there may be economic benefits from significant improvements to urban freight that could be achieved by means of plans to put freight at the heart of thinking about new infrastructure.
- ii. Understanding of urban freight issues is still missing from the thoughts and plans of many urban policy-makers who shape the developments of the city and is also missing in the framework of companies that are responsible for commercial developments and indeed architects and master planners. This omission of freight means that it is almost always only introduced as an afterthought into the discussion.
- iii. The governance structure of cities and the way in which planning decisions are made often means that freight considerations can be overlooked. This happens with overlapping governance approaches where the strategic benefits of allocating space to freight may be outweighed by the local reaction that may be against the acceptance of freight activity in a given location.

The issues above have been explored in a recent study that has been carried out in London that looked at the potential role of railway stations as urban freight hubs.

General description

Between October 2014 and March 2015 we have carried out a research investigation of the potential role of railway stations as urban freight hubs. The research involved an extensive literature review about the scope for rail use in urban freight and the existing and potential use of railway stations as freight hubs. The review was worldwide and involved a survey of freight experts (XX in total). The review was then extended through a series of interviews with key stakeholders from the public and private sector considering the issue at a national level (i.e. within the UK). These interviews then formed the basis for a further more detailed assessment of the potential importance of railway stations as urban freight hubs within London.

The context for this research was the recent and planned major redevelopment of railway stations in London as a result of initiatives such as High Speed 1 (the line linking London to the Channel Tunnel) and High Speed 2 (the planned development of a high speed line to run north from London and eventually to connect London and Edinburgh). These initiatives have resulted in a major regeneration programme around the existing railway stations of Kings Cross-St Pancras and in the next stages Euston. In addition, there will be the development of a new 'city' at Old Oak Common which is within London but approximately 10 km to the north west of the city centre.

Results and conclusions

The research has highlighted the way in which freight issues are considered (or not) when major infrastructure and urban development initiatives take place. The research will focus on this topic with respect to work carried out in the UK but it may be possible to extend this

to look at other countries and this will be considered. The research has identified significant interest in the scope for new freight initiatives that result from the recent and proposed developments in the urban area. Several opportunities have been identified in the research including:

- The scope for freight to be switched from road to rail and then to utilise spare capacity on trains running into central London in the non-peak period;
- The possibility of using the redeveloped railway stations as freight hubs to serve the immediate area around the stations (the stations themselves are already significant retail centres in their own right);
- The scope to combine consolidation approaches as part of the redevelopment of the stations in order to promote non-road freight transport within the city.
- The importance of partnerships in sharing information and understanding between the public and private sector stakeholders.

However, the research has also highlighted some major barriers to this type of initiative among which the following can be noted:

- Freight has not featured at the start or initiation of any of these major infrastructure developments - at best it has only been addressed following pressure from specific interest groups.

- Uncertainty over roles and responsibilities: this is particularly complicated when infrastructure such as rail development is involved. Here there are national aspects that need to be considered and at the same time city-wide issues (i.e. for London as a whole) and then in addition the local level near to the stations and other development areas. This introduces a complexity that can make taking actions relating to freight opportunities very difficult.

- Some indications of a lack of knowledge about the extent of opportunities for freight within the planning bodies concerned with these major infrastructure developments.

At the conclusion of the research a number of actions have been identified to try to overcome some of these barriers.

References

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