EXPLORING THE PUBLIC ACCEPTABILITY OF ROAD PRICING

Dr Charles Musselwhite
Senior Lecturer in Traffic and Transport Psychology
Centre for Transport & Society, University of the West of England, Bristol

Professor Glenn Lyons
Professor of Transport and Society
Centre for Transport & Society, University of the West of England, Bristol

Abstract

This paper reports on a major study for the UK Department for Transport that has involved deliberative research to explore how public attitudes (and motivations for such attitudes) towards road pricing influence public acceptability. The research involved reconvened focus groups in a number of areas of the country that were considering road pricing. The first phase of fieldwork took place in eight areas (with a total of 446 participants) meeting twice. The second phase of research, involved the same participants from five (and latterly three) of the areas meeting for an additional three group discussions and a workshop with follow-up depth interviews. In the course of successive sessions participants were taken through a process from considering the problem and causes of congestion, through potential solutions to congestion, to general and then specific propositions for road pricing.

The authors developed two conceptual model of road pricing acceptability that provided a research framework for the study – one concerning four sequential stages of acceptability at the individual level and the other addressing aggregate acceptability against time. The paper sets out these models, drawing upon the richness of empirical insight to reveal a number of key determinants of public acceptability and how acceptability can change.

Key findings explored in the paper include the following: the public recognise that congestion is a problem for the country but many do not consider it a serious problem for themselves; there is scepticism over whether congestion is a soluble problem and following on from this that people may prefer to cope with it in their own way; and road pricing is initially viewed with widespread negative reaction but this reaction softens in some people as their understanding of the issues improves while in others negativity is hardened. Finally the heterogeneity of attitudes and acceptability suggests a corresponding selective and targeted approach to any communications strategy intended to impact upon acceptability.

1. Introduction

One of the greatest barriers to the introduction of road pricing is the lack of public acceptability (Gaunt et al., 2007; Gray and Begg, 2001; Jones, 1998, 2003; Schade and Schlag, 2000). Typically public acceptability of road pricing is quite low (Bartley, 1995; Bird and Morris, 2006; Gaunt et al., 2007; Luk and Chung, 1997; Schade and Schalg, 2000).

Previous research suggests that a number of factors can have a positive influence on the acceptability of a road pricing scheme. There needs to be a recognition that there is a (transport) problem (such as congestion) that requires a solution like road pricing (Bielefeldt, 2004; Bird and Vigor, 2006; Vagverket, 2002) and recognition that road pricing could effectively mitigate the problem (Gaunt et al., 2007; Jones, 1998). Acceptability is increased if road pricing is part of an overall traffic management plan within a consistent transport strategy; and good travel alternatives need to be available which allow choice and enable modal shift (Green and Stone, 2004).
Increased support is found when revenue directly benefits the motorist (e.g., reduction in road tax and fuel duty), or the local transport network as a whole (e.g., local transport improvement schemes notably public transport alternatives, or expanded road capacity and maintenance) (CIIT, 2000, 2001, 2002; DfT, 2003; Dublin Transportation Office, 2003; Green and Stone, 2004; Harrington et al., 2001; Ison, 2004; Jaensirisak, et al., 2005; Odani and Akita, 1996; Tretvik, 2003). A road pricing scheme needs to be perceived as simple and fair (Harsman et al, 2000; Schade and Schlag, 2003). Appropriate information on the scheme must be disseminated via education, publicity and marketing, since a lack of knowledge leads to lower acceptance (Gaunt et al., 2007; Odeck and Brathen, 2002). Trust is important to acceptance in terms of in the supporting technology (Tretvik, 2003) and the delivering body of the scheme (Baker, 2002; Gaunt et al., 2007; Viegas and Macario, 2003). Finally, issues of data protection and privacy must also be addressed (Green and Stone, 2004; Harsman, 2003; Ison, 2000).

There continues to be an active interest in road pricing in the UK. The first, and to date only, major road pricing scheme was introduced in London in 2003, making use of powers provided to local authorities in the 2000 Transport Act to introduce road pricing provided that revenues were hypothecated – i.e. reinvested into transport improvements. Immediately prior to introduction, 39% of Londoners supported the congestion charging scheme and 41% opposed it; immediately following its introduction the figures changed to 57% and 27% respectively (TfL, 2004). The apparent success in London was followed by the Government in July 2003 announcing a Road Pricing Feasibility Study to advise the Secretary of State on practical options for the design and implementation of a new system for charging for road use in the UK. This included examination of public attitudes towards road pricing (Green and Stone, 2004; Lyons et al, 2004). In February 2005 Edinburgh, in seeking to introduce a £2 daily congestion charge for the city, held the UK’s first referendum on congestion charging. Over 60% of eligible voters responded with a resounding ‘no’ from nearly three quarters of the votes cast (Gaunt et al, 2007). Meanwhile, in its 2004 Transport White Paper (DfT, 2004), the Government had announced a new Transport Innovation Fund (TIF) to “support the costs of innovative and coherent transport measures – which will include road pricing, modal shift, and better bus services” (DfT, 2004). Subsequently, a number of city authorities in England were awarded ‘pump-priming’ funding in 2005 to develop ideas for local packages of road pricing and public transport: the West of England Partnership (Bristol City Council, Bath and North East Council, North Somerset Council and South Gloucestershire Council); Cambridge; Durham; Greater Manchester; Shropshire County Council (for Shrewsbury); Tyne and Wear; and the West Midlands conurbation.

In 2006, the DfT commissioned a major research study into public acceptability of road pricing which was intended to inform and advance the national debate on road pricing, whilst also developing understanding of how and in what circumstances public concerns regarding road pricing might be addressed. Additionally, the research findings were expected to assist local authorities who may be considering the potential of road pricing schemes in their areas. This paper draws upon the final report from the study (Owen et al, 2008). It begins by introducing two conceptual models of road pricing acceptability that were developed to provide a research framework for the study - one concerning four sequential stages of acceptability at the individual level and the other addressing aggregate acceptability against time. The paper then explains the social research methodology employed before setting out the findings and conclusions.

2. Conceptual models of road pricing acceptability

Crucially, acceptability is not something that is fixed; it can vary intra-personally (within individuals), inter-personally (between individuals) and chronologically (over-time).

Aggregate variability over time

Based upon insights from road pricing schemes that have been considered and in some cases introduced, both in the UK and elsewhere (Lyons et al, 2004; Bielefeldt, 2004; Gaunt et al, 2007), Figure 1 is a conceptualisation of how public acceptability of road pricing may change over time along a trajectory towards and beyond implementation of a road pricing scheme (see Goodwin, 2006; Owen et al., 2008). It is not intended to imply that in all cases such a trajectory has existed or would exist but to demonstrate the dynamic nature of acceptability, noting that acceptability does
change and that it can be changed. The latter point relates to a recognition that scheme information communicated to the public can (be used to) influence acceptability (Boot et al, 1999; Odeck and Bråthen, 2001; Leeds City Council, 2002; Goh, 2002). The conceptualisation suggests that at some initial point when the prospect of road pricing is first raised, the public overall has little appreciation of what it is about or why it is being considered and perhaps in light of instinctive resistance to change, acceptability is low. However, as the public is made or becomes more aware of the imperative of addressing the problem of congestion and appreciates the nature of road pricing as a potential solution, perhaps with broad clarification that revenues raised are reinvested into (public) transport, then acceptability increases to a point where sufficient support is felt politically to exist to allow plans for a scheme introduction to go ahead. From this point the public becomes increasingly acquainted with the specific details associated with a proposed scheme which tend to fuel speculation about winners and (more notably) losers from the scheme. Public interest and concern increases such that overall support follows a path of decline and reaches a low point, perhaps fuelled by media hype, at a point immediately prior to implementation. Assuming that this low point in public support does not thwart the scheme’s introduction and that the introduction of the scheme itself yields demonstrable benefits then a post implementation increase in public support can be seen.

Figure 1  Previously observed dynamics of public support for road pricing over time

Notwithstanding the conceptual nature of Figure 1, from a political standpoint an overarching question may be, what is an acceptable level of public acceptability in order to assume a sufficient mandate or at least to have sufficient confidence to proceed with road pricing? It could be taken as democratically acceptable if 51% or more of people expressing a view showed support. A lower level of support might be deemed politically acceptable if it could be assumed support would later increase.

Acceptability at the level of the individual

In order to begin to better understand what gives rise to levels of public support at the aggregate, a further conceptual model was developed with the intention of reflecting a sequential process of acceptability that may apply at the level of each individual (Lyons et al., 2006; Owen et al., 2008). The Gearing-Up Model of Road Pricing Acceptability (abbreviated to the GU Model) uses the metaphor of an engine with moving parts (corresponding factors affecting acceptability) whose collective interactions determine what drives (or prevents) an individual’s acceptability. Figure 2 shows the ‘primary’ cogs of the engine depicting a logical interplay.

The collective interaction of the cogs determines what drives (or prevents) public acceptability. The cogs can be in one of three states: sticking (a factor or set of factors reflecting a resistance to accepting road pricing); free-wheeling (a factor or set of factors having little or no influence on acceptability); or driving (a factor or set of factors contributing positively towards acceptability).

If an individual does not accept that there is a (transport) problem to be solved in an area, then the corresponding cog sticks which means, following through, other cogs stick in turn: the individual will not accept the need for demand management or, therefore, road pricing or a specific scheme. In terms of understanding, it was thus argued as important to recognise that, for example, someone...
who objects (in any way) to a specific road pricing scheme may do so, not because of some specific feature of the design, but because they fundamentally oppose demand management, perhaps believing it compromises the right to personal freedom and choice.

The primary cogs in Figure 2 are each shown to be related in the engine to a set of three secondary cogs, labelled as ‘person’, ‘knowledge’ and ‘opinions’. This suggests that acceptability (or not) at the primary level is dictated by characteristics of the individual, the knowledge they receive and possess and their formulation of interpretations and opinions.

The GU Model thus provided a framework of thinking with which to structure the deliberative research that was to be undertaken within the study.

Figure 2 ‘Primary’ cogs of the Gearing-Up Model

Public acceptability of…
1. a problem needing to be solved
2. the need for demand management
3. the need for some form of road pricing
4. the specific road pricing scheme proposed

3. Methodology

The methodological approach involved 7 waves of data collection and in-depth qualitative analysis. For full details see Owen et al. (2008).

Participants and group composition

Participants were purposively selected from the general public to take part in the study on the basis of a variety of key variables, including: age; socio-economic group (ABC1 and C2DE); level of interest in current affairs; gender; ethnicity; disability; and car usage. Groups of participants were identified initially for eight local authority areas in England and Wales selected because they were considering the potential for introducing road pricing (to varying degrees). With six groups per area reflecting a range of urban and rural locations, a total of 46 groups took part in the first phase of the research with each group convened twice (one area had difficulty recruiting and only ran with four groups). A total of 446 participants took part in wave one. All the participants were invited to attend the second wave of group discussions, and 380 (85.2%) returned. A total of 259 participants took part in wave three, who were selected from five of the eight areas, in order to concentrate on a smaller number of areas in more depth. It was ensured that quotas of the demographic background of participants from the remaining areas were kept. A total of 143 participants took part in wave four, who were recruited from three areas. All participants in wave four were invited to attend the group discussions for wave five, and 137 (95.8%) returned. At wave six, 20 participants were invited to attend each workshop who had been involved in at least three waves of discussion groups. A total of 89 participants attended the workshops in the five areas who took part in wave three. Each focus group lasted one and a half hours. In addition, at wave seven, 48 of the participants who took part in the group discussions were recruited to take part in telephone
depth interviews which lasted between 30 minutes and one hour. Each participant was rewarded with an incentive for taking part in each wave with the level of incentive ramped across the seven waves.

Deliberative research discussions’ focus

Wave one and two discussions focussed on the first cog of the GU Model and addressed the issue of congestion and what it meant to the participants and to society as a whole and addressed whether it was a significant enough problem that required some form of solution. Wave two built upon this and addressed the second cog of the model focussing on attitudes towards and acceptability of demand management techniques and principles. At wave three more depth was given to discussing congestion and demand management at a local level in an effort to move the discussion on from ‘knee-jerk’ reactions to more considered and personal responses. Wave three also introduced the principle of road pricing in line with the third cog on the GU Model. Waves four and five required the discussion to move beyond these levels to look at the attitudes towards and acceptability of road pricing when more specific aspects were introduced. In order to follow the trajectory model (Figure 1), and the GU Model (Figure 2), two levels of information were presented, split between wave four and five. Wave four introduced hypothetical models of road pricing in the area concerned and presented both distance and cordon pricing models, including the area of the charge, cost of the charge and the times of the day the charge would be imposed. Attitudes to the models and what impacted upon acceptability were examined. At wave five, a further level of detail was examined concerning the hypothetical road pricing models presented at wave four. This included extra detail on technology (with actual examples of the technology presented to participants), payment and billing options and fines. In particular, the issue of privacy was investigated as previous research and analysis of earlier rounds suggested this as an area of contention. Wave six concentrated on bringing together the main findings from waves one to five and seeking public attitudes towards them and investigating the effect of communications on the acceptability of road pricing. Wave seven refocused on the key areas of discussion that had taken place in waves one to five. A particular area of focus in the interviews at wave seven was to explore whether the participants felt that their acceptability of road pricing had changed since they became involved in the research and the reasons for this.

The next section of the paper organises the findings according to the four ‘levels’ of acceptability depicted in the GU Model.

4. Findings

A problem needing to be solved

The study investigated congestion as the problem that needed solving. Initially participants felt congestion was more of a problem for society than it was for them personally – i.e. businesses and the economy suffer more than they do personally. This has been identified elsewhere: in 2004, Omnibus Survey results for British adults found that 92% thought road congestion was a serious problem for the country as a whole (with 44% considering it a very serious problem) while 63% indicated that road congestion was either not a very serious problem or not a problem at all for them personally (DfT, 2005). However, closer focus and examination of congestion in the research resulted in an increased awareness of congestion,

“I think the problem of congestion much more acute, much more critical than I thought when I first came here.” (55-65, ABC1).

In addition, there was increased focus on congestion impacting at a personal level, both practically (such as being late) and emotionally (through stress and frustration). The practical and emotive impacts of congestion were reported to be made much worse if congestion was unpredictable and there was a feeling that traffic had become increasingly more unpredictable over the past few years and indeed it was now generally believed it was a socially acceptable excuse for being late:

“People are more tolerant I would say, if you say I am late because I was stuck in traffic and like 10 years ago it’d be ‘like you what?’” (25-34, C2DE).
Participants felt it was possible to adapt to congestion and as a result become somewhat desensitised to its effects. They changed routes where possible and psychologically removed themselves from congestion, indulging in the time available in the personal space of their vehicle by listening to music and the radio for example (for a related examination of the positive and negative experiences of the daily commute see Lyons and Chatterjee (2008)). Although there was some resignation from the participants over congestion (especially amongst the 45-64 year olds), experience and awareness of congestion at an individual level is linked to the feeling that something needs to be done about it. Indeed, over the course of their involvement with this research participants reported becoming increasingly aware of congestion and as a result increasingly concerned for the need for it to be solved. Conversely, those who did not experience much congestion, especially those retired from work and those living in rural areas, felt congestion was not an important issue that required a solution. In addition, younger people felt they had never known anything different and did not view congestion as a major problem,

"I think one of the things is because we are all sort of relatively young we have grown up in our short driving lives, that is how it has been, whereas, like I noticed the group when I came in was slightly older, they have probably seen it get worse and are probably more concerned than we are because we don't know any different" (18-24, ABC1).

Experience and awareness of congestion also resulted in a recognition amongst the participants, especially from younger participants, that they themselves must take some responsibility for congestion.

Presenting participants with the statement that, according to the 2004 Transport White Paper (DfT, 2004), “by 2015 traffic will have increased by 31 percent” there was a rather emotive response, despite most participants believing it to be completely true. People immediately felt this at an individual level, exclaiming how much this would add to journey times and then commented at a societal level, being concerned how this increase would impact on the environment. This served to highlight the possibly imperceptibly worsening traffic conditions over time that are accommodated by the public, contrasted with a sharper reaction to the statement of cumulative effect over time. Raising public awareness of the reality of congestion in this was did seem to somewhat increase acceptance that something must change at an individual level in order to address this societal problem.

The need for demand management

Notwithstanding the degree if acceptance of a problem needing to be solved, overall, there was the feeling that people should have the freedom to drive on the roads they wanted to, when they wanted to. Participants also generally felt that their own car use was always necessary. This said, amongst the youngest participants (aged 18-24) there was acknowledgement that they did make unnecessary journeys and that laziness was one of the reasons for this. They also talked of driving for the sake of it and suggested that while it may not always be necessary, it was a pleasurable mode of transport. Meanwhile older people felt they would not drive unless they had to and that car use was generally for necessary journeys – though driving having become a habit was also acknowledged.

Demand management was perceived as something that reduced people’s freedom to travel – it was initially seen as something that would restrict rather than create choice. Demand management was not at first defined for participants and when given the opportunity to discuss it, it was clear that confusion existed between traffic and demand management: it was common for the public to conceive of demand management being typified by tangible measures such as roundabouts and traffic lights. Emotive responses highlighted the importance of freedom to travel and participants cited rights, freedom and civil liberties:

“driving is very important. It is basic human rights being able to do what we want when we want” (65+, ABC1);

“I think if you have worked hard, you have paid for your car, you are paying your insurance, you are paying your tax; I don’t think it is up to anyone else to dictate to you when and where you can’t use it” (25-34, C2DE); and

“everybody wants that personal freedom that we have been sold” (35-44, ABC1).
information on demand management appeared to come from two main sources. People’s own experiences of using or being influenced by demand management concepts were a prime source of information. However, it was clear that local press also had a role to play in reporting the relative success and failure of such interventions. In particular, negative press about past demand management failures influenced negatively acceptability of future interventions.

When encouraged to discuss broadly measures that could manage demand, participants favoured soft measures aimed at encouraging individuals to consider changing travel mode, especially better public transport, and encouraging flexi-working and car sharing. Hard measures aimed at discouraging individuals from using their cars were seen negatively and this included all forms of road pricing. Participants did point out that they realised the efficacy of soft measures relied in part on hard measures being used, and hard measures coupled with soft measures raised the acceptability of hard measures. However, in conclusion people would prefer to have their journey and freedom restricted by congestion than by a demand management principle. There was a feeling of being ‘all in it together’ where no one person had caused the limit on freedom and everyone suffered – demand management was seen as interference from government in which different people suffered a loss in freedom to different degrees and unfairness of this was highlighted.

The need for some sort of road pricing

During phase one (waves one and two of the discussion groups) participants were asked to discuss their attitude towards the principle of road pricing as a particular form of demand management. During discussions it emerged that road pricing would be acceptable if it really did reduce congestion. However, participants questioned whether road pricing would be effective in reducing congestion since it relied on behaviour change and it was believed that people, including themselves, had little or no option to change their journeys during peak times. Hence, there was a view that revenue generation was the primary aim,

"there is an argument that, there is the congestion: we must do something about it and one solution is to charge people to use certain roads at certain times. Also, discourage them from using the roads. That is a bucket with holes in, it really is. It feels to me that it is more about gaining revenue, because I can’t agree that it is going to solve the problem and we are going to be left with the problem" (55-64, ABC1, interested in current affairs).

Concerns about the principle of road pricing included personal issues such as cost and a lack of choice in their travel behaviour to be able to change times and modes to reduce such costs. In addition, there was a lack of trust in those who would be responsible for introducing road pricing, including a feeling that income from the scheme would be misdirected. There was concern regarding how road pricing would negatively affect other users and the wider society, including the potential negative impact of road pricing on businesses and the economy and the unfairness of road pricing for certain groups (especially those who need their car such as disabled and older people and those on low incomes). In particular it was felt that people may not be able to afford to travel to work and therefore not work,

“people would stop working because it would be cheaper not to work. You will be driving people into the benefits system” (35-44, ABC1).

Some participants mentioned road pricing has the potential to reduce congestion and journey times, but such positive ideas about road pricing generally had to be prompted. Nevertheless, throughout the research, there was a growing understanding amongst groups of participants that the introduction of road pricing had the potential to reduce congestion, and as such amongst such participants, acceptance began to grow. Although it was considered to be ‘a shame’ that people should be charged more to drive, it was argued that there was no alternative solution. However, there continued to be staunch opposition to the principles of road pricing throughout the research.

Bearing in mind that there was ongoing national and local media coverage of road pricing issues during the course of the research (including high profile coverage of an online national petition against road pricing) the study found there to be a general sense that the introduction of road pricing was inevitable. Knowledge of TIF funding received by local authorities, the reported success
of the congestion charge in London, and debate in the media over the issue were all said to have encouraged participants' view that road pricing was going to be introduced.

The perceived inevitability of the introduction of road pricing had different influences on participants' acceptability. There was suggestion that the apparent inevitability made road pricing less acceptable, and participants reported feeling dismayed at the idea that others may become more resigned and accepting of the scheme on consideration of its inevitability. That said, there was some mention amongst 45-54 year old participants that acceptability had increased simply because they felt it was inevitable and that they would have to live with road pricing even though they opposed it,

“it's still not something I'm in favour of but I just get the feeling that it is going to happen and it's like when something is a long slow process, you kind of accept things because you read about it in the press and you get used to the idea” (45-54, ABC1).

During the course of the deliberative research process, participants on the whole felt they had become more open towards the idea of road pricing and were more willing to consider the concept and some had become more positive over time, females in particular. However, overall the negative feelings were generally sustained.

The need for the specific road pricing scheme

To allow for greater exploration of attitudes and acceptability of road pricing, participants were shown mock-up examples of two types of road pricing model during wave four and five discussion groups: a cordon charge model and a distance charge model. The hypothetical nature of the schemes presented to participants was emphasised. Maps of hypothetical zones in which the charges would apply in the local area were shown, with details on charges and times of charging. The cordon charge model was generally considered more familiar and easier to understand than the distance-based model. Key concerns around both models included that charging zone boundaries may be unclear, that places that should be accessed freely such as hospitals and railway stations would be located inside the charging zone, and that charging zones would not cover areas of highest congestion levels. Particular concerns around the distance charge model included: implementation and administration costs of the model; the bureaucracy required to administer the model; a lack of visibility of charges incurred in real time; and concerns that having an ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ charging zone would make the model more complicated to use. Doubts continued to be expressed that either model would reduce congestion. Furthermore, details of the models highlighted to the participants the potential of displacement of congestion to other times of the day or other locations,

“it seems to be just transferring the problem to a wider band, a wider time band. A lot of people who have got flexible working will all want to start at seven o'clock in the morning, so seven o'clock in the morning will become a nightmare time, and it'll get busier after half past nine” (45-54, ABC1).

Cost, rather than reduced congestion, tended to be the assumed impact that would be felt be individuals themselves. There were concerns around the costs personally and costs to others including businesses (who would pass on the cost to customers) and those who may not be able to afford it,

“well we are looking here at potentially £500 to £600 a year or more to use your car. Those are the sorts of figures potentially, and that is a lot of money to people with low to moderate incomes” (18-24, ABC1).

The concept of specific town centres no longer being used and shops closing was also mentioned, “well what I’m concerned about is the town centre dying” (55-64, ABC1).

Privacy was a key issue amongst a small yet vociferous group of people. It began to be more of an issue as detail on the design emerged,

“I’ve got nothing to hide but then you think, why should everyone know where I’m travelling?” (35-44, C2DE); and

“I don’t like people knowing where I’ve been, it’s as simple as that” (35-44, C2DE).
The greater concern for privacy appeared to be as a result of a combination of factors including the national petition against road pricing coming to the fore during the period of research and an increasing focus on technological issues associated with road pricing during the wave five of discussion groups.

Details of the road pricing schemes that were perceived to make them more acceptable included: the possibility that new roads would be built as part of the scheme; potential improvements to public transport; charging times that apply in peak travel times only, and exemptions for certain groups. Initially, there was a strong feeling that participants did not want road pricing to be introduced and for many individuals the details make little difference. Hence detail on the reliability of the technology and methods of payment had little influence on such people’s acceptability,

“the knowledge that it will work ok is not enough to say that you are going to pay for it. The principle is of more payment for motorists to drive on roads that they normally drive on for free. How you pay for it is a little minimal sort of side issue” (45-54, ABC1).

However, as noted earlier, there was a growing understanding amongst some participants that ‘something had to be done’ about the problem of congestion and that road pricing would be the most effective way of addressing the problem:

"the more we got into it the more they started to warm to it a little bit more" (45-54, ABC1);

“as the discussions went on I think it explored other options and I think a new angle was showing, so we were a bit more receptive at looking at other opportunities maybe that could arise. So I think we got a bit more positive towards the end and more negative to begin with” (25-34, ABC1); and

“the whole … research thing did have an impact in terms of I was quite negative about it at first and then when we were given the information we were given which made me more open to it and more …I wouldn’t necessarily say the views of friends/family have made any difference to that” (25-34, ABC1).

However, overall the negative feelings were generally sustained and there remained a vociferous group of participants who were strongly against the idea of road pricing at the final stage and did not feel it was an appropriate solution. There was also evidence of negative attitudes becoming more entrenched as detail emerged,

“we have talked about it for the past 12 months, chuntered round, we have had maps of Durham, different areas of Durham to go through and get out of it and that sort of thing and at the end of the day a shake of the head” (45-54, C2DE).

5. Concluding discussion

The GU Model was conceived of at the outset and proved effective in framing the study. The research has underlined the importance of recognising a hierarchy of acceptance – from acceptance of a problem needing to be solved through to acceptance of a specific road pricing scheme intending to offer a solution. Road traffic congestion in general is recognised as a problem for society; it is less readily seen as a problem for the individual though unanticipated congestion prompts personal frustration. Engagement with the topic can lead to an increased recognition, acceptance and ownership of a problem needing to be solved. The gradually worsening nature of the problem is something to confront in terms of engagement – a need to overcome the frogboiler phenomenon (i.e. a problem getting imperceptibly worse over time). People tend to believe, based upon their experiences of congestion and of apparent continued failure by national and local government to ‘solve’ it (especially in relation to traffic management measures), that congestion is an insoluble problem. As such they are inclined to favour self-regulation – avoiding or coping with the problem themselves – since this aligns more closely with the espoused principle of freedom to drive than push or pull measures to change behaviour imposed upon them in the form of demand management.
Heightened coverage of road pricing can draw a distinction between acceptability and inevitability – that government is prepared to countenance such a difficult measure can foster a resignation to its eventual arrival. However, individuals expect road pricing to be effective if it is introduced while wishing it not to increase their own costs of motoring – in this context ‘revenue neutral’ can sound as though it satisfies the latter but not the former. People can struggle to really understand what road pricing would mean for them in terms of their daily lives and travel needs. This can hamper openness to the concept. Likewise, information on hypothetical road pricing schemes and concepts is harder to grasp and thus influence acceptability than would be the case if ‘real’ examples with evidence of impact were provided. At the end of a hierarchy of acceptance where a specific scheme is considered, the introduction of such detail tends, if anything, to reduce a sense of acceptability as concerns about wider issues such as cost and privacy are exacerbated by information presented on technology. In relation to specific issues, privacy is not a natural concern to many people; however when the topic is probed it can invite a sense of being a much greater concern: thus a dormant yet volatile issue.

There seems to be a need for a segmented or targeted approach, since different groups of individuals view road pricing in different ways. Most noticeable during the research was the apparent tendency for female participants to become more open to road pricing over the course of the research and for younger males and those from C2DE socioeconomic backgrounds to either remain very negative or become more negative during the course of the research. Further study of the importance of travel and car use in terms of instrumental, affective and financial concepts could help shed more light on these differences. A final important concluding point concerns the different life roles people have and how these roles can differently affect issues of acceptability. It is notable that the role as driver rather than citizen or community resident tends to assert and reassert itself in discussion. However, in relation to effective communication of issues, a greater receptiveness to concerns and the need for solutions arises when people think as parents or, prospectively, grandparents.

The study has arrived at two key questions whose answers we suggest will govern acceptability of road pricing:

- would it really solve or effectively tackle congestion?; and
- would it make life better for me (i.e. would it be a price worth paying)?

It seems at least from this study that the trajectory of road pricing acceptability which was conceptualised at the start (Figure 1) may not in fact have such a pronounced initial peak as first implied. Acceptability of road pricing starts appreciably low and, if anything, can be reduced by the provision of further information and detail. However, scope remains, with insights gained from this study, for action to be taken both in terms of what information is communicated and how it is communicated to positively encourage a greater openness to considering road pricing.

6. Acknowledgements

The authors gratefully acknowledge the input to the main study from their colleagues in the research team: Rachel Owen, Anna Sweeting, Sue Clegg, Alan Wenban-Smith, Phil Goodwin and Vanessa Stone. The authors are also grateful for the engagement in, and critical feedback concerning, the study and its reporting from the Social Research and Evaluation division in the DfT. The views in this paper are those of the authors only, and do not necessarily represent the views of the DfT or any other Government Department.

7. References

This is a pre-publication version of the following article:


DIT (2003). Attitudes to roads, congestion and congestion charging. Summary article of March and July 2003 ONS Omnibus Survey results


