

TRAVEL PLANS HELP COMPANIES SURVIVE RECESSION, NEW REGIONAL NETWORK HEARS

Businesses with travel plans are happier, healthier, wealthier and are better placed to beat the credit crunch, a new regional travel network has heard. More than 30 organisations attended the inaugural meeting of the East of England Travel Plan Network in Cambridge last month and were told how helping staff travel to work can help you beat the recession.

New NBTN members in the East of England heard how discounted fares, car-sharing schemes, increased rail and bus use and home working policies can cut commuting, business travel and congestion estimated to cost the region's businesses about £1 billion per year.

"Even though times are tough, introducing better travel policies can help your business and your employees save money, reduce congestion and cut CO2 emissions," said Heather McInroy, Director of the National Business Travel Network (NBTN).

Heather said that according to a recent British Chambers of Commerce report four out of five businesses advised that they were affected by congestion caused by high levels of car commuting and company driving.

"Car dependency means that businesses in the East of England region suffer from lost business, recruitment difficulties, wasted time, increased costs and more staff sickness."

New network members attending the first meeting held at Cambridge's SmartLife Centre on Monday 23 March 2009 heard a range of innovative measures to cut car commuting that included:

- Bringing business park staff to work in normally empty 'park and ride' buses returning from the Norwich city centre;
- Using video and audio conferencing technology to slash business travel and cut costs;
- Negotiating discounted rail and bus fares for staff;
- Promoting car share schemes and offering the closest car park spaces, and
- Taking advantage of tax breaks to buy bicycles at 30 per cent of the cost.

One company saved £100,000 by replacing their private shuttle bus service by negotiating a deal with a local bus company.

Adding his support to the new network, Mark Webb, from the Cambridge Travel for Work Partnership said companies that put more effort into developing a travel plan were more productive; had fewer staff off sick and enjoyed reduced costs for them and their employees.

"Travel plans can keep the economy moving because they cut congestion, they allow commuters to cut emissions and they save everyone money. Travel plans tick all the boxes," Mark said.

Mark outlined a series of practical measures that will increase car sharing, bus and rail use and commuter cycling. His Cambridge Partnership gives travel advice to organisations covering more than 55,000 employees – one quarter of the city's commuters, across 66 work hubs.

Mark urged organisations to consider managing their car parks and to introduce dedicated car sharing spaces nearest to the entrance. "This can transform car-sharing levels overnight," Mark said.

Bike training, negotiating deals with local cycle shops, pool bikes and a giving two-wheeled commuters a 10-minute time credit to change were just some of tips Mike revealed to increase cycle use. "Set up a bike users group and use their evangelism to get people riding to work" he urged.

Mark said bus and rail companies were often happy to negotiate deals and discounts and were willing to provide bespoke corporate publicity.

"We are talking about changing the way people live their lives which is a big ask. A happy, healthier, wealthier workforce is got to be a good thing, and that's what a travel plan achieves."

Delegates also heard a range of best practice case studies outlining how different companies, sites and business and science parks have used travel planning to successfully reduce costs and cut congestion significantly.

Julia Gregory, from Stansted Airport, said that BAA Stansted had introduced a travel plan after a business case revealed that it would free up car parking for passengers use and cut down on shuttle bus costs. BAA has introduced its own bus and rail discount card for staff and has almost halved staff car journeys to the airport since it introduced a travel strategy.

Julia, Head of Transport, Planning and Policy, gave her backing to the new network saying it was much needed and that it would allow clusters of smaller companies to co-ordinate travel planning measures.

Satellite giant, Sky, said it was important that the travel plan was part of a culture of the organisation. Sky, which sponsors the British Olympics cycling team, is on target to increase employee cycling from 2.5 to 9 per cent as part of strategy to reduce single occupancy car travel by almost 30 per cent.

Transport Manager, Darrell Goddard, outlined Sky's approach to the network. "A successful travel plan that brings sustainable behaviours is about cultural change management because it is all about people. It is key to understand the culture elements of the organisation into which a travel plan is being introduced. In a nutshell, robust process and proactive management of culture are the key ingredients to winning hearts and minds'.

Andrew Cassey, Travel Plan Manager at BT's Adastral Park told delegates that, in the Ipswich area, a sustainable travel forum had been set up locally to identify opportunities to change travel behaviour to and from the huge office site.

"Giving people information and communicating it has been key to changing behaviour," Andrew said. "Whether it is credit card timetables, information stands, maps, competitions or pledges; make it available and people will make their own choice."

Andrew said video monitoring has been useful in seeing what comes onto the site where single occupancy car use has reduced by eight per cent. "Not all incentives will work and radical step changes will require disincentives," revealed Andrew. "We have more carrots than sticks but a small change can make a big difference."

Hutchison Ports carried out postcode analysis of their workforce and were amazed to find out almost half of their workforce live within walking and cycling distance of the Felixstowe docks – yet only about a handful of people walked to work. The huge port operator needed to reduce single occupancy car use as part of Section 106 planning application and travel planning was seen as the way to achieve a modal shift.

"We needed to get more than 1,000 employees to change their behaviour some of the time to meet our targets," said Project Manager Andrew Cann, from the Port Development Team. "Car-sharing was seen as the effective and inexpensive by our board. In order to reach the target of 1,500 registrations, the company incentivised the sharing scheme by offering £10 department store vouchers which the board was prepared to pay for."

The Department for Transport, which helps fund the NBTN and shares it aims to reduce the 37 per cent of CO2 emissions from commuting and business trips gave its support to the new network. Daniel Barrett from the Sustainable Travel Initiatives Team gave an overview of the national policy framework urging businesses to introduce travel plan measures.

During the Q&A session, delegates to the new network – which covers the counties of Cambridgeshire, Hertfordshire, Norfolk and Suffolk – heard that each council has a travel plan co-ordinator who can help business through the red tape.

A recent economic study by the East of England Development Agency (EEDA) revealed that transport congestion in the region is reducing employee productivity by nearly £1,000 per year and costing businesses and residents around £1 billion per year.

Mike Salter, from the East of England Development Agency, said that a 10 per cent reduction in highway trips in Cambridge and Norwich could bring £20 million in benefits to both cities and about £50 million in the London Arc area. "I am a strong supporter of this initiative," Mike said.

Following the success of the first regional network meeting, NBTN Director, Heather McInroy said that the Network would be looking to set up other travel plan forums across the country.

"I have no doubt that a regional network of forums will allow a lot of smaller companies to take advantage of the joint working and to learn collectively from one another."

For more information on how a travel plan could help you or for the details of your city council travel plan officer, contact heather.mcinroy@nbtn.org.uk.

Presentations from the event are available to download from the NBTN website.