

ATAP – the return of “integrated transport”?

‘ATAP’, the *Auckland Transport Alignment Project* (final report, September 2016), attempts to get Central Government and Auckland Council together, after it emerged that Auckland Council’s prioritising of the Central Rail Link didn’t necessarily sit well with the Government’s focus on *Roads of National Significance (RoNSs)*. This has happened before!

From what now seems very clunky 1930s traffic modelling in Chicago, USA, ‘classic’ transport planning saw models and computers become massively more grunty and sophisticated, coinciding in the 1970s with growth of environmental concerns and a search for alternatives to the car. Then (with strikingly similar events to those preceding ATAP) in the 1980s Birmingham City Council in the UK prioritised a proposed Birmingham-Wolverhampton light rail line (using a disused railway formation) as top of its transport programme projects list, the Government (which favoured roads) asked them to re-think, and the City Council nevertheless stood by the rail line as its preferred top project.

The result was ‘BITS’, the 1989 *Birmingham Integrated Transport Study*, a collaboration of the City Council as roading authority and the West Midlands County Council as public transport authority. This was followed by a rash of similar studies for nearby metropolitan areas – ‘CITS’ for Coventry, ‘BCITS’ (pronounced ‘buckets’) for the ‘Black Country’ (so named for industrial revolution pollution) and one for Solihull (who were no doubt thankful that their name was one, not two, words). The idea got taken up for non-metropolitan areas (and was formative in the UK’s later ‘*Local Transport Plans*’) and then overseas. Some readers may remember NZ’s ‘GATS’, *Greater Wellington Area Transport Study*, from the early 1990s. This consciously sought to apply the BITS approach in planning regional public transport and roading together. Hamilton’s late-1990s *HITS* is another NZ example.

ATAP’s two original aims were to ease traffic congestion (think Central Government’s focus on *RoNSs*) and increase public transport use (think Auckland Council’s wanting to turn Britomart into a through station). However, there’s more than a touch of ‘dèjà vu’ between ATAP and BITS.

No sooner was BITS out, than academia was poring over it, and writing critiques, some of which showed up its flaws. Because it came from a pragmatic collaboration between different authorities (as ATAP also was) the wider public didn’t get much of a look-in. BITS was a highly technical document, with learned consultancies each throwing in their two-penn’orth, but little public profile or involvement from the wider public.

Its ‘roads plus public transport’ origin also meant BITS was breathtakingly silent on non-motorised transport. As Birmingham’s Cycling Officer, I read it from cover to cover to see what it said about cycling. I found one sentence: “*More must be done to encourage cycling*” – and nothing on how this might be addressed. ATAP matches this closely: reference to a “*need to continue to make improvements to road safety and active modes (walking and cycling).*” (By coupling these together, do I also detect a retreat into the old thinking of walking and cycling as a ‘road safety problem’?).

ATAP, on cycling, also says that “*In a number of areas, including safety and active modes (walking and cycling), the views of central and local government are already well-aligned on the priorities and likely level of future funding. We have therefore taken as given the initiatives that are already underway in these areas, including the Safer Journeys Action Plan, the Auckland Road Safety Plan and the Urban Cycleways Programme*”. So that’s alright then? Yeah, right.

Other than this, all I could find on cycling in ATAP was another passing reference to “*a significant amount of expenditure*” on it, and two eye-catching photos of some happy cyclists riding on the famous Central Motorway Junction pink path (where else?).

Since ATAP has so much to say on the role of public transport, where is the coverage of the great potential of good conditions for walking and cycling to increase the catchment areas and attractiveness of rail stations? Or walkability within bus stop ‘pedsheds’? Or the necessary traffic management, traffic calming, change to on-street car parking regimes, and filtered permeability road network planning, together with the traffic capacity reductions resulting from all this, and how the rest of ATAP is going to enable all this to happen? This is the sort of thing which would enable walking and cycling to fulfil their potential, and it would need to be at quite a radical scale, to deliver results across geographical areas of any significance. I could go on

Like with German-style roundabouts, covered in previous *Roundabout* issues, most of what will most benefit cyclists will come through mainstream programmes, as it affects general road traffic conditions – not an Urban Cycleways Programme (regardless of what that might be doing). Let’s also remember that, as a proportion of overall transport budgets, the latter’s much-praised increase in funding is from one-tenth of diddly-squat to one-fifth of diddly-squat. I hear a birthday party was held recently, one year on from the pink path’s opening, which included the spectacle of some people singing “*Happy Birthday*” to a piece of pink tarmac (I kid you not!), surrounded by swarming mass volumes of motor traffic. When are (actual and would-be) cyclists and walkers on the rest of the transport system going to have their birthday?

The ‘*One Network Road Classification*’ and ‘*Network Operating Plans*’ have, like ATAP, also bridged a professional dichotomy, between traffic engineers’ views of roads for traffic movement and urban designers’ view of roads as ‘places’. They’ve also recognised bus and cycle route networks. These, plus Wellington’s multi-agency *Let’s Get Welly Moving* initiative, and the 2010 revision of the NZS4404 subdivision guide, all now recognise that roads exist for many different functions, not just the movement of motor traffic. ‘*Link and Place*’, a term and philosophy coined a few years ago by Professor Peter Jones of University College London Centre for Transport Studies, is prominent in these documents. However, it’s quite another thing to resolve the tensions and contradictions between the now many different functions road systems are recognised to have.

So at least one, and perhaps two, cheers for ATAP – which also contains a lot of other good stuff, like (at last) preparing to bite the difficult bullet of road pricing as a demand management tool. A step in the right direction, and worth commending for that, but there are gaps to fill and further steps to take.

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Photo captions

Birmingham-Wolverhampton light rail (now long-since built and operating), a transport planning cause celebre of yesteryear, much as Auckland's Central Rail link is today.

"Happy birthday, dear Lightpath". One swallow does not make a summer, one path does not make a walking- and cycling-friendly city. ATAP is largely silent on the types of measures which would achieve this.