

Transport and travel in North Staffordshire: The view from the  
business community.

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## **Executive Summary**

1. This survey was conducted between July and September 2004 with a 130 businesses completing the survey. Together these companies employ nearly 20,000 employees in the North Staffordshire area.
2. 50% of respondents regard road congestion in North Staffordshire as a serious problem. Over 60% of businesses see congestion as a serious drawback of the West Midlands region.
3. The business community is very evenly divided over the issue of road charging, with roughly a third in favour, a third against and a third undecided.
4. Two thirds of businesses are in favour of widening the M6 and 62% of businesses would support an extra lane on the M6 that was tolled.
5. 85% of businesses are against a tax on workplace parking.
6. The A50 is generally seen as a very successful addition to the regional road network.
7. The current improvements to the A500 are almost universally supported by business, 59% of businesses see them as essential and another 32% as useful.
8. 78% of businesses see rail freight as irrelevant to their business.
9. Manchester airport is ranked as the most important air service for businesses in North Staffordshire, followed by Birmingham and the East Midlands.
10. The car and road travel dominate how employees get to work, business travel and the supply and distribution of goods.
11. Three quarters of businesses are in favour of more park and ride schemes in North Staffordshire.

## Introduction

This study of road and rail transport facilities and their problems is the third to be prepared by the North Staffordshire Chamber of Commerce and Industry. In 1990 the Chamber published 'Clearway 2000 – from bottle kilns to bottlenecks' followed in 1996 by 'Clearway 2005- bottlenecks revisited'. This present study, like its predecessors, represents the views and opinions of members of the Chamber on current transport issues in North Staffordshire and the wider West Midlands region.

Since publication of the 1996 report there have been substantial changes in the local and regional transport network. The A50 between Stoke and the East Midlands has been reconstructed as an express highway, the new toll section of the M6 has been opened as an alternative to the congested M6 motorway around Birmingham, the two principal roundabouts on the A500 are currently being rebuilt to provide for two-level junctions with the local road system and line improvements on the West Coast rail route through Stoke to provide reduced journey times are almost complete.

This survey is based on the results of a postal survey (see appendix 1) of 130 Chamber members, together with a telephone survey conducted with a 10% sample (13 members) drawn from the original postal survey. As in the previous reports the emphasis is upon the use made of current transport facilities, the problems that are experienced and the views of member companies on the deficiencies that still need to be remedied in order to create a more efficient network that best meets the needs of the local industrial and commercial community.

## Methodology

The survey was carried out in July, August and September and the 130 businesses that responded together employed almost 20,000 people. Average firm size was 151, but although five organisations employed over 1000 only one fifth of all the businesses surveyed employed more than the average of 151 workers. Manufacturing and engineering firms accounted for 43 per cent of the sample, followed by retail companies and marketing and consultancy firms. However in terms of numbers employed some of the largest organisations were in the service sector, especially education and local administration.

The majority of the firms were located in the North Staffordshire built-up area with a few companies, mainly in the service sector, located in outlying centres such as Leek.

**Table 1 – Breakdown of companies by type of industry**

	Frequency	Percentage
education / training	8	6.2
retail	16	12.3
manufacturing / engineering	56	43.1
transport / distribution	6	4.6
financial services	11	8.5
marketing / consultancy / recruitment	15	11.5
public service / housing	7	5.4
design services	11	8.5
Total	130	100.0

## **Analysis**

### **Road congestion**

The problems caused by road congestion have traditionally been met by traffic management measures, road improvements or new road construction. A policy of constructing new routes wholly or partially financed by the private sector has produced roads such as the M6 toll motorway and the survey asked members for their views on these new initiatives. Just one half of all respondents regard local road congestion as a serious problem, with only 5 per cent considering that it is not an issue for their activities. This was confirmed by the telephone survey where all respondents saw road congestion as either a considerable or very serious problem.

Road congestion within the West Midland region was seen as a serious drawback to commerce and industry by over 60 per cent of respondents with only five per cent dissenting from this view. Furthermore, 57 per cent of all firms stated that road congestion had increased over the last year.

In terms of particular aspects of business activity delays caused by congestion to employees' work travel and the transport of goods into and out of industrial works are seen as the most serious.

### **Road charging policies**

Opinions on road charging policies were less strongly polarised than those on traffic congestion. Only 27 per cent of all respondents strongly supported the general principle of charging and 34 per cent were against with the remainder expressing a neutral viewpoint. Comments included

“A very subjective and selective issue – some instances could be supported but equally others rejected.”

The telephone survey also produced a mixed response, with three in favour, five against and five adopting a neutral position. Those organisations opposing the charging principle as a whole stated that existing taxes and other charges on vehicle operations, both commercial and private, were already high and that more of this income should be devoted to road improvements as an alternative to the imposition of user charges.

Views on the significance and utility of the recently opened M6 toll road as an alternative to the congested section of the original motorway around Birmingham were divided according to whether car or commercial lorry traffic was involved. There was support from 75 per cent of businesses in terms of car usage, with only 5 per cent being opposed to the toll, although frequency of use varied, with 40 per cent using the toll section only once a month. This level of use was confirmed by results from the telephone survey.

For freight traffic over two thirds of respondents saw the toll facility as of no value to their activities and only 18 per cent used the new road either daily or up to once a week. All firms in the telephone survey were favourable towards the M6 toll road but the majority only used it infrequently. For freight haulage in particular the current toll levied was seen as a very substantial additional charge to the overall costs of certain trips which could not be justified for many journeys, even if delays were incurred on the existing motorway through the Birmingham area. (Note the survey was done before the recent reduction in toll charges for lorries).

Although the current use of the M6 toll road was subject to reservations over 75 per cent of businesses saw an extension of such roads as useful or essential and nine out of the twelve surveyed by telephone also supported the provision of similar roads for freight traffic despite the level of tolls involved.

**Table 2 - For your business and your employees, what is your view of the M6 Toll for car users?**

	Frequency	Percentage
Not applicable	5	3.8
positive	98	75.4
neutral	20	15.4
negative	7	5.4
Total	130	100.0

Respondents to the telephone survey were also asked for their views on the revived proposal to construct a toll road parallel to the existing M6 between Wolverhampton and Manchester to alleviate congestion. Five businesses were strongly in favour, four were uncommitted and four were against, again on the grounds that current costs of road transport were high enough without users being subjected to additional charges. Comments included

“I do not see this as essential as the new M6 toll road around Birmingham”

“Good idea in principle but the planning will need very careful consideration”

“If it is similar to the M6 toll it would be a benefit on the whole especially as the Junction 15 to 16 section on the M 6 can be very dangerous and generates many accidents.”

“I am very comfortable with this proposal.”

However two thirds of all respondents supported the widening of the existing M6 north of Birmingham and 62 per cent were in favour of this extra lane being subject to a user charge.

Efforts by local authorities to reduce the use of the car for journeys to work by levying a charge on workplace parking met with a strong negative response from respondents to both the postal and the telephone survey with only about five expressing any support for this proposal and the overwhelming majority (85%) against it.

### **The A50 express highway**

The rebuilt A50 has now been in use for over six years and is used regularly by almost 88 per cent of all firms surveyed, either for car or freight journeys. Most users see it as generally a congestion-free route with only 15 per cent regarding congestion as a serious problem. Various described by telephone respondents as a ‘major benefit’, a ‘dream of a road’ and a ‘real godsend’ there is nevertheless a common recognition of congestion problems regularly occurring at the western end of the A50 at its junction with the A500, at the entrances to the Meir tunnel and in the Uttoxeter area in the morning and evening peak travel periods. On balance however this route is seen as a highly successful addition to the regional road network.

### **The A500 improvement scheme**

The current improvement works on the A500 to create two-level junctions at the two roundabouts in Stoke are almost universally supported, with 32 per cent of businesses in the postal survey seeing them as useful and 59 per cent as essential; all the telephone respondents regarded the road upgrading as essential and several firms considered that when the works are completed the congestion at the A500/A50 junction may be reduced., especially at peak travel periods. However one comment was

“I am concerned that if the M6 congestion problems around Stoke are not solved soon then the benefits of the improved A 500 ie when intersections are rebuilt, will be lost.”

## Rail transport

The use of rail transport for passengers and freight is still a minority element within the overall transport system in the North Staffordshire area. Only four per cent of respondents regard rail borne freight as being important to their business, with 78 per cent seeing rail as irrelevant.

Views on passenger rail travel are less strongly divided, with 42 per cent making occasional use of the train for business purposes, 31 per cent seeing rail transport as important and 5 per cent regarding it as vital for business. The use of rail passenger services has remained largely unchanged in the last ten years, but the 18 per cent of businesses recording a decrease in usage is probably due to the service disruptions associated with the main line upgrading through Stoke and Crewe.

Responses to the telephone survey indicate that only three firms regard rail as essential for business travel and that inadequate parking at Stoke and Stafford can be a deterrent to the use of these stations. The service disruptions on the main London-Manchester line through Stoke are accepted by nine of the twelve telephone respondents as generally necessary provided that the promised improvements in journey times are eventually achieved. However several firms expressed reservations that it will be difficult for rail to attract back the many passengers lost to other modes of transport as a result of the reduced services during the reconstruction period.

## Air transport

Air transport is seen as important or vital for business activities by 40 per cent of all respondents, as compared with 36 per cent placing rail in this category. Air freight is also favoured over the railway with 24 per cent of firms ranking it as important or vital for their business.

**Table 3 - How important is air transport to your business?**

	Frequency	Percentage
irrelevant	55	42.0
occasional not essential	24	18.3
occasional & important	24	18.3
vital for business	28	21.4
Total	131	100.0

Manchester Airport is seen as the most important and convenient for travel, followed by Birmingham and East Midlands airports, and the use of these regional airports has risen by 25 per cent over the last 12 months. The car is the dominant means of travelling to and from these airports, with rail accounting for only two per cent of trips. The reinstatement of a direct Stoke to Manchester Airport rail service was supported by only 22 per cent of businesses and the minimal use of rail was explained by several telephone respondents as being due to the timing of flight departures and arrivals rarely coinciding with available rail services to and from the North Staffordshire area.

## Travel to and from work

The dominance of road transport is also underlined in the means of transport used for travel to and from work, business travel and the assembly and distribution of goods to and from commercial and industrial premises.

Employees use the car for 81 per cent of work trips, with seven per cent using the bus and ten per cent walking. Although a different survey base was used in 1996 the proportion using a car for travel to work in that year was 75 per cent with 14 per cent making use of local bus services.

Travel on business in 2004 involves 84 per cent of trips by car, eight per cent by rail and seven per cent by air. An estimated 92 per cent of goods travel by road, with rail accounting for one per cent but air freight now taking seven per cent.

**Table 4 – Mode of travel for employees, goods and business travel (percentages)**

	Car	Car or lorry	Rail	Bus	Air	Walking
How employees get to work	81		0.5	7	0	10
Delivery/receiving goods		92.5	1		3.5	1
Business travel	83		7.5	0.5	7	0.5

Note: figures don't all sum due to rounding and some missing values. No weighting has been allocated to the different size of firms, so this a mean figure.

## Local bus services

The decline in the significance of bus services for local commuting follows the national pattern and 78 per cent of firms considered bus travel as being inessential to their business activities. Two respondents to the telephone survey, both firms with large workforces, consider that bus services within the built-up area need urgent improvements in terms of frequency and reliability. Rural bus services were also criticised in terms of poor access from villages to the city.

The success of the park and ride system as a means of encouraging bus travel and reducing car usage in towns such as Shrewsbury and Chester was cited by several firms and three-quarters of all businesses in the survey were in favour of more such schemes in North Staffordshire. It is claimed that there appears to be no clear strategy on park and ride and that more sites should be established on the outskirts of the city, possibly alongside the A500 to allow for an easy interchange between car and bus.

## Green travel plans for businesses

The introduction of 'green' travel plans by employers with large workforces, encouraging workers to change from car to public transport or walking for their work trips, has been slow in North Staffordshire. At present only 13 per cent have a plan in operation and six per cent expect to implement one in the near future. This leaves almost 80 per cent of the businesses surveyed without any schemes to attempt to reduce car travel by their employees, a proportion which perhaps reflects the indifferent quality of local bus services as perceived by many firms.

## Approaches to solving local transport problems

The responses to an invitation to all firms to rank eight approaches towards solving local transport problems in terms of assisting their own business's requirements were varied and sometimes not in accord with viewpoints expressed in other parts of the survey. Four of the potential solutions involved road transport, two rail transport and two bus services and cycle routes.

**Table 5 – Potential solutions**

<i>a) Increased road capacity</i>
<i>b) Introduction of road pricing</i>
<i>c) Increase vehicle road tax</i>
<i>d) Increased investment in local rail services</i>
<i>e) Increased investment in inter city rail services</i>
<i>f) Increased investment in bus services</i>
<i>g) Expansion of park and ride, bus lanes and cycle routes</i>
<i>h) Increase price of fuel</i>

The most strongly favoured solution was to increase road capacity, which was ranked as a first or equal first priority by two thirds of all firms. An increase in inter city rail investment was ranked first or equal first by 17 per cent and investment in local bus and rail services was seen as a first or equal first priority by 23 per cent of all respondents.

Rankings for proposals to extend the practice of road charging through tolls were lower; this was in part a reflection of a “wait and see” attitude that is noted earlier in the report. Support for some road charging is apparent in the earlier part of the report.

Although the level of support for investment in rail transport ranks second to that expressed for road improvements, the current use made of the railways by North Staffordshire businesses is not significant. The impact of improved journey times which will be offered when the West Coast main line upgrading is finally completed cannot be assessed at present and in particular traffic lost to rail as a result of service disruptions will have to be regained. Support for investment in local rail and bus services may reflect the current dissatisfaction with these services and can be seen as an attempt to encourage an increased use of local bus and rail in the future if improvements are made.

## **Summary conclusions**

The opening of the A50 and the M6 toll road are seen as major improvements to the local transport system although the extent to which they are used varies widely.

Proposals for the building of further toll roads is given qualified support although their potential use by freight hauliers will depend upon the charging policy.

Roads remain the dominant means of transport for employees, business travel and freight carriage and are seen as the priority for any future investments.

The current upgrading of the A500 receives unqualified support and many firms see this scheme as an integral part of the existing A50 route improvement.

The potential of rail transport in the local area cannot be assessed until the introduction of improved main line services has had time to influence decisions on business travel.

We would recommend a further report into business attitudes once the A500 improvements have been completed and the upgrade of the rail services have been completed.

During 2004 several official reports were published which continue to emphasize the urgent need for a reappraisal of policies on transport investment. An academic study by Prof. Stephen Glaister (Imperial College, London) calls for a relaxation of central government control over transport investment by major cities and recommends that local authorities be given greater powers for financial planning and policy. The Confederation of British Industry has proposed a ten-year plan to upgrade many more trunk railways and to widen congested motorways costing an estimated £252 billion. Funding of the latter schemes by tolls is recommended providing that other vehicle operating taxes are reduced. The M6 motorway is included in the CBI's recommendations for road widening to be funded in this way.

The policy of replacing road taxes with tolls is also supported by the Institute of Public Policy Research, which recommends an extension of the charging policy to new or improved motorways and the adoption of the London congestion charging scheme by other major city authorities.

The report illustrates the overwhelming dependence on road transport in the region, and the problem of road congestion. There are strong political, economic and environmental reasons as to why the current situation is unacceptable and detrimental to the region. This reports suggests that the business community in North Staffordshire is probably ahead of the general public on the issue of road tolls and that opposition to this measure may have been overstated. Road tolls may well be a practical solution along side a host of other measures such as improving public transport, and providing park and ride.

## **Appendix 1 – Sample questionnaire**

For each question please tick appropriate box or circle rating, unless directed otherwise.

1. Please specify the nature of your business activity: \_\_\_\_\_

2. How many people does your business employ? \_\_\_\_\_

3. How big a problem for your business would you rate road congestion?  
(scale: 5 = major problem, 1 = no problem at all)

a) Within the North Staffs conurbation: 1 2 3 4 5

b) Within the West Midlands: 1 2 3 4 5

4. Over the last 12 months, has the cost to your business of traffic congestion . . .

increased       stayed the same       decreased

5. Please rate the effect of traffic congestion on your business:  
(scale: 5 = major problem, 1 = no problem at all, 0 = don't know)

a) Delivery to customers:	1	2	3	4	5	0
b) Supply to business site:	1	2	3	4	5	0
c) Employees travelling to/from work:	1	2	3	4	5	0
d) Ability to retain staff:	1	2	3	4	5	0
e) Ability to recruit staff:	1	2	3	4	5	0
f) Ability to keep customers:	1	2	3	4	5	0
g) Ability to win new business:	1	2	3	4	5	0

6. In terms of dealing with congestion for your business, what is your view on the following two strategies?

a) Road use charging:       in favour       neutral       against

b) Workplace parking taxes:       in favour       neutral       against

7. For the M6, please rate each aspect:  
(scale: 5 = major problem, 1 = no problem at all, 0 = don't know)

a) Safety:	1	2	3	4	5	0
b) Access:	1	2	3	4	5	0
c) Journey times:	1	2	3	4	5	0
d) Any other problem (please specify):	1	2	3	4	5	0

8. What are your views on widening the M6?

in favour       neutral       against

9. If the M6 was widened to four lanes, would you support the extra lane being tolled?

- yes                       no

10. The A50 - does your business use this route?

- yes                       no

a) If yes, how would you rate congestion on the A50?  
(Scale: 5 = major problem, 1 = no problem at all)

1	2	3	4	5
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b) How has the congestion on the A50 changed over the last 5 years?

- improved               unchanged               deteriorated

11. For your business, do you consider the current improvements on the A500 through Stoke-on-Trent to be . . .

- essential               useful               unhelpful               irrelevant

12. For your business and your employees, what is your view of the M6 Toll for . . .

- a) Car users:               positive       neutral       negative       not applicable  
b) Lorry/truck users:  positive       neutral       negative       not applicable

13. How often is your business using the M6 Toll?

- a) Car users:               every day       2-3 times a week       once a week       once a month  
b) Lorry/truck users:  every day       2-3 times a week       once a week       once a month

14. For your business, the extension of the M6 Toll from J11a to J19 would be . . .

- essential               useful               unhelpful               irrelevant

15. How important are bus services to your business?

- irrelevant       occasional use, but not essential       occasional use and significant       vital to the running of the business

16. Does your business have a 'green travel plan'?

- yes                       no                       did have, but not now                       will have one soon

17. Are you in favour of more 'park and ride' schemes in North Staffordshire?

- yes                       no

18. How important are rail services to your business?

a) For passengers:

- irrelevant       occasional use, but not essential       occasional use and significant       vital to the running of the business

b) For freight:

- irrelevant       occasional use, but not essential       occasional use and significant       vital to the running of the business

19. In the last 12 months, has your use of rail travel . . .

- increased     stayed the same     decreased

20. How important is air transport to your business?

a) For passengers:

- irrelevant     occasional use, but not essential     occasional use and significant     vital to the running of the business

b) For freight:

- irrelevant     occasional use, but not essential     occasional use and significant     vital to the running of the business

21. Please RANK (1-5/6) the airports your business uses in the region in terms of their importance (both people and freight).

(From 1 = most important to 5/6 = least important and 0 = not used)

Birmingham		Manchester	
East Midlands		Liverpool	
Coventry		Other (please specify):	

22. Over the last 12 months, has use of regional airports by your business . . .

- increased     stayed the same     decreased

23. When flying on business, how do your staff usually travel to the airport?

- private car     taxi     bus     train

24. For those that use Manchester Airport, how useful would be the reinstatement of a direct rail service from Stoke-on-Trent to the airport? Would it be . . .

- not used at all     used only occasionally     often used     always used

25. Transport networks used.

For each of the three listed activities please estimate the relative importance of each mode of transport (please express as a percentage) e.g. for employees travelling to/from work 50% use cars, 5% rail, 25% buses and 20% walk/cycle.

a) Employees travelling to/from work by:

Car:	Rail:	Bus:	Air:	Walk/ Cycle:
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b) Delivering/receiving goods by:

Car/ Lorry:	Rail:	Bus:	Air:	Walk / Cycle:
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c) Business travel by:

Car:	Rail:	Bus:	Air:	Walk/ Cycle:
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26. Transport solutions – in terms of helping your business RANK in order of potential the following

(1 = greatest potential, 8 = least potential)

	RANK
a) <i>Increased road capacity:</i>	
b) <i>Introduction of road pricing:</i>	
c) <i>Increase vehicle road tax:</i>	
d) <i>Increased investment in local rail services:</i>	
e) <i>Increased investment in inter city rail services:</i>	
f) <i>Increased investment in bus services:</i>	
g) <i>Expansion of park and ride, bus lanes and cycle routes:</i>	
h) <i>Increase price of fuel:</i>	

27. If you have any comments that you wish to make about any aspect of transport either within

North Staffordshire or the West Midlands please state them below.

**Optional:**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Company: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone No: \_\_\_\_\_

**Please complete and return to Jane Cook at the North Staffordshire Chamber of Commerce & Industry, FREEPOST (12107), Commerce House, Festival Park, Stoke on Trent ST1 5BE  
BY 6 AUGUST 2004**

**THANK YOU FOR YOUR CO-OPERATION**