

How do local authorities set their LTP targets?

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Abstract

In their guidance for the second local transport plans (LTP2) the Department for Transport introduced an incentive system based in part on the targets set in the LTP2 plans and the local authority's subsequent performance against these targets. Through this assessment the indicative integrated transport block funding for each LTP authority could be modified by between -25% and +25%. This raises a number of questions including how have the authorities approached the setting of targets? Do authorities benchmark targets against their peers? And what types of strategies are employed by authorities in playing the LTP2 game?

This paper presents the results of a series of interviews with selected LTP authorities that investigated how transport targets were determined for LTP2. A series of interviews were conducted with a range of people ranging from those responsible for individual targets, heads of LTP, regional government officers, and consultants to those with political control (e.g. councillors). These interviews were used to help provide a perspective on the above questions among others and to develop the questionnaire that was sent to all LTP submitting authorities in March 2006 investigating how they chose their targets for LTP2. The results from this questionnaire are presented and an analysis is provided on the processes used in setting targets in LTP2 alongside discussion of the authorities' perceptions of how the funding adjustments will affect their authority.

The introduction of performance related settlements linked to targets alongside improved guidance for LTP2 has had a marked impact on the behaviour of local authorities in setting targets and far greater thought and sophistication has been employed in setting the targets compared with LTP1. A number of concerns have been raised about the next stages of the game when DfT passes judgement on the plans and targets. It therefore remains to be seen whether the reward and penalty scheme actually incentivises authorities to achieve or overachieve against their targets.

Introduction

Since 2000, the Department for Transport (DfT) has required local authorities in England to prepare 5 year 'Local Transport Plans' (LTPs) in which local authorities set out the policies and expenditure required to make the integrated transport vision a reality. The first round of LTPs from 2001/02 to 2005/06 (LTP1) was characterised by authorities setting a series of aspirational targets and an annual assessment process focussing largely on scheme delivery and capital spend (Atkins, 2005). The process evolved into one attaching greater emphasis to performance management and progress towards targets with authorities being ranked and rewarded according to their performance (*Ibid.*). This change of emphasis, although weakly signalled in the LTP1 guidance, caused difficulties to authorities that had been too bold or too broad in the targets they adopted (*Ibid.*). The emphasis on targets and monitoring performance has been taken through into the second round of LTPs (LTP2) and provides the focus for this paper.

For the recent second local transport plan (LTP) submission the DfT introduced a system whereby each authority would be given an initial integrated transport block funding for the period 2006/07 to 2010/11 using a formula allocation mechanism. The formula was developed based on the four shared priorities (congestion, accessibility, air quality and safety) and adapted on a needs basis (described in DfT, 2005). This funding could then be increased/ decreased by up to 25% based in part on the targets that have been set and the subsequent performance against these targets. Whilst other factors such as quality of planning, involvement of stakeholders and performance management processes also count in the assessment (DfT, 2004), they mainly relate to processes which will influence whether or not authorities are likely have set their targets wisely.

The move to a more definite performance-related bonus structure linked to targets is not uncontentious (Marsden et al., 2006). Proponents suggest that positive effects might accrue from a greater institutional focus on achieving agreed goals (NAO, 2001). Equally, critics suggest that such processes are limiting in several ways such as focussing behaviours only around those aspects that can be measured, and that they may create perverse incentives (Smith, 1995).

This aim of this paper is to focus on how local authorities have set their targets for LTP2 and to shed further light on the possible benefits and drawbacks of target setting within the LTP process. The remainder of this paper will describe the guidance provided to LTP authorities on target setting and assessment for LTP2. The methodology adopted to investigate how targets were set for LTP2 is then set out. The results of the investigation are then presented including findings on the techniques used for setting targets, targets that were identified as being easier/ harder to set, the authorities assessment on how 'stretching' the targets that they have set are and finally draws some conclusions about the impact of the new system.

DfT Guidance

LTP2s were submitted at the end of March 2006. The DfT set out the initial guidance for these plans in some detail in 2004 stipulating a set of indicators that local authorities had to set targets for and constraining the total target limit to between 20 and 40 (DfT, 2004). This provided a marked change from LTP1 whereby authorities had flexibility over which targets they set and how many they set (Marsden and Wootton, 2001). The initial mandatory and best value performance indicators required for LTP2 reported in DfT (2004) are reproduced in Table 1. These indicators represented a mixture of indicators already used by local authorities (best value performance indicators) and new indicators not previously included in an assessment (e.g. accessibility target).

Table 1 Mandatory and best value performance indicators

Mandatory Indicators	Best value performance indicators
LTP1: Accessibility target	Principal road condition
LTP2: Change in area wide road traffic mileage	Non principal Classified road condition
LTP3: Cycling trips	Unclassified road condition
LTP4: Mode Share of journeys to school*	Total killed and seriously injured casualties (KSI)
LTP5: Bus punctuality indicator	Child killed and seriously injured casualties
LTP6: Changes in peak period traffic flows to urban centres**	Total slight casualties
LTP7: Congestion**	Public transport patronage
LTP8: An air quality target**	Bus satisfaction
	Footway condition

*Removed from the requirements in September 2005

** Only a requirement for certain authorities

The Department for Transport provided local authorities with some guidance as to how they should set their targets. DfT (2004:6) states that authorities hoping to produce a good second LTP will set targets that meet the following aims:

- *“support targets for housing, jobs and social inclusion, and the environment;*
- *prioritise targets relating to outcomes, not outputs and inputs;*
- *contain targets focused on the transport shared priorities*
- *contain targets that are challenging but realistic.*
- *Include locally set targets (DfT, 2004:7)*
- *Reflect national targets (DfT, 2004:7)*

In addition to these aims the guidance states that the LTP should ‘*contain targets and trajectories for key outcome indicators; and...a range of other targets and trajectories reflecting the delivery of the transport solutions identified by the plan*’. The emphasis of the guidance was for authorities to

set challenging targets. In so doing, it was also clear that authorities should be in a position to monitor and achieve these targets.

Along with the guidance on the types of characteristics that a target included in the LTP should possess DfT provided guidance on how the targets within would the LTP process would be assessed in 2006 (DfT, 2004). It states that for each of the targets it will:

- “compare the target with those being offered by comparable LTP areas;
- consider particular local circumstances that might have justified a more or less stretching target;
- reach a final view about whether to classify the target as ‘unsatisfactory’, ‘satisfactory’ or ‘stretching’.” (DfT, 2004:95)

It then states that it will allocate points to the classifications of ‘unsatisfactory’, ‘satisfactory’ or ‘stretching’ giving a “high weighting to the mandatory LTP targets, which will account for at least half of the total points available to each LTP area for the impact assessment” (DfT, 2004:95). In terms of setting targets local authorities were given guidance as to what ‘satisfactory’ and ‘stretching’ targets involve for certain of the mandatory targets. These have been reproduced in table 2. One of the issues identified by Atkins (2004) was that “difficulties in setting realistic but challenging targets” was one of the key factors that contributed to the weaker performance of certain authorities under LTP1. Authorities are required to use a variety of techniques and strategies to ensure that their targets fit into the ‘satisfactory’ and ‘stretching’ categories and to ensure that they are setting *realistic but challenging* targets.

Table 2 Indicators for which minimum standards for targets were provided

Indicator	Satisfactory	Stretching
KSI	√	√
Child KSI	√	√
Sight Casualty	√	√
Bus Punctuality	√	√
Bus satisfaction	√	√
Cycling levels	√	X
Peak traffic flows to and from urban centers	√	X
Maintenance	√	X

Source: (DfT, 2004:96)

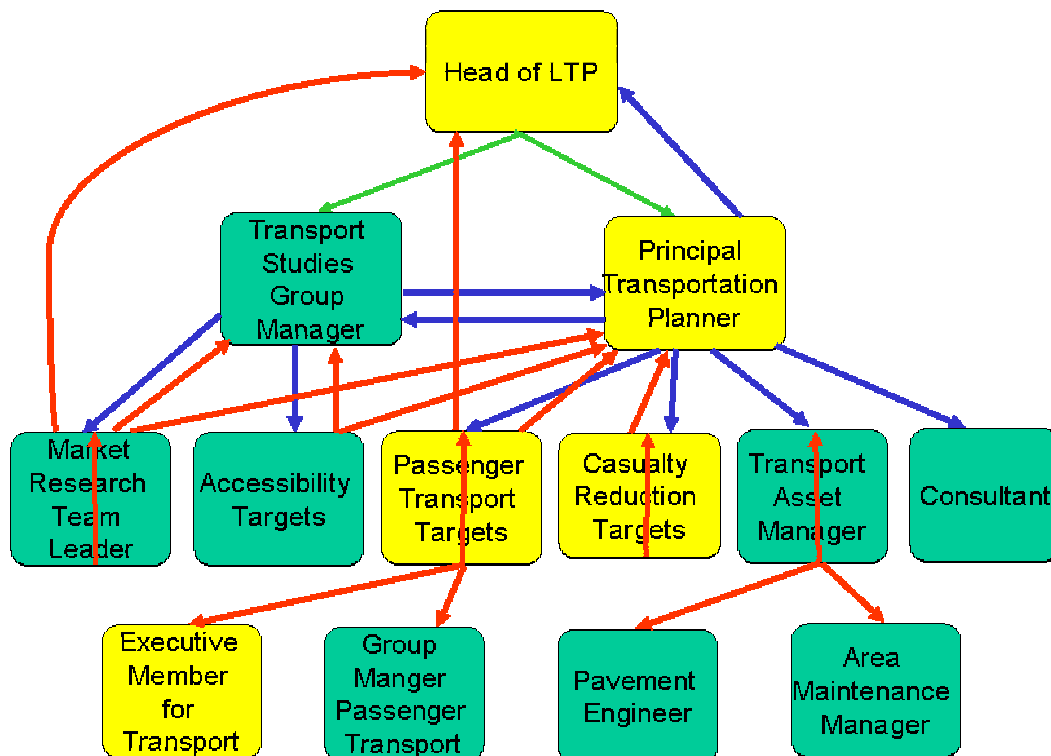
Methodology

The two main methods described in this paper used to investigate how local authorities set their targets were to:

- a) interview a subset of LTP2 submitting authorities before submission; and
- b) use a postal questionnaire to target all LTP2 submitting authorities after the submission date.

Local authorities were selected for interview using criteria to ensure a broad spectrum of types (unitary/two-tier), regions and past attainment. As an exploratory exercise the sample is not representative of all authorities but did inform the full postal survey. The aim was to interview a wide range of individuals that were involved in the target setting process within these authorities and to do this a snowballing exercise was conducted. The first stage involved contacting the individual within the local authorities that was in charge of the LTP and asking them to nominate which individuals they thought were important in the target setting process. The second stage involved asking the people who had been nominated who they thought were the key people in the target setting process. The third stage then involved asking the people who had been nominated in the second stage who they thought were important in the target setting process. This built up a range of individuals many who had been nominated more than once. Figure 1 provides a pictorial example of one of the snowballing exercises. The arrows indicate who nominated who and the lighter boxes represent the individuals who were interviewed within that organisation. It shows the range of individuals involved in the target setting process. The interviewees ranged from those responsible for individual targets, head of LTP, regional government officers, and consultants to those with political control (e.g. councillors). In one authority the chairman of the local bus company was identified as an important individual and so was interviewed. For further details on the snowballing procedure see Wasserman et al. (1995).

Figure 1 Example of the snowballing exercise



The questionnaires were sent to all LTP2 submitting authorities. A sample of 24 authorities¹ has been used to inform the results in this paper. These include 2 metropolitan authorities, 9 shire counties and 13 unitary authorities. The results from the interviews and questionnaires will be treated alongside each other. The questionnaire is available at http://www.its.leeds.ac.uk/projects/opt_incentives/

What techniques were used to set the targets in LTP2?

Both the interviews and the questionnaires focused on what mechanisms local authorities were using to set their targets. The snowballing exercise identified that a wide range of individuals were involved in the target setting process. Common approaches discussed in the interview for setting targets were:

“its target by target and its done on a subjective but informed view on what is achievable” (Head of LTP).

“There is not a chain of command it is almost the other way up. e.g. the people at the bottom of the tree of the hierarchy know best about safety targets” (Principal transport planner).

While these two quotes were typical of the responses there was some evidence that certain authorities were trying to set all their targets to be ambitious regardless of achievability and the chain of command on targets was not always bottom up.

The questionnaire identified a number of techniques used, which can be summarized as:

- “we followed the national guidelines”
- Stakeholder consultation
- Regional forums were held to discuss our targets
- Benchmarking
- Targets were based on a statistical analysis of trends/ previous performance
- Realistic and achievable targets rather than aspirational

For a more in-depth review of the advantages and disadvantages of these strategies see Marsden and Bonsall (2006).

The authorities interviewed stated that the guidance on satisfactory and stretching levels were useful in setting the targets. However a number of authorities stated that the satisfactory level of certain of these targets would be stretching for their authority for example,

“targets were set to at least meet the minimum criteria of the LTP guidance even if this seemed ambitious” (LTP officer).

¹ This sample size will be larger as we are still receiving responses

Groups had been set up with local stakeholders to look at the LTP issues and targets were discussed in this forum. For example certain authorities that felt that they had a good relationship with their bus operators would discuss their proposed targets with these operators and ask their advice on whether they were achievable.

“Our targets are set in consultation with key stakeholders” (LTP officer)

Stakeholder groups had been set up in all the interviewed authorities to determine what accessibility indicators to use and the targets to be set.

All authorities interviewed reported that they looked at the provisional plans of other authorities and benchmarking was taking place. However only 60% of the questionnaire survey respondents agreed with the statement that they benchmarked their targets against other LTP2 submitting authorities. One of the reasons for this not being 100% could be that the provisional plans submitted in July 2005 did not have to contain the final targets, so there was less scope to benchmark and certain authorities didn't include any targets in these plans. The evidence showed that targets were more likely to be discussed at a regional level or between groupings (e.g. unitaries) than between pairs of authorities.

Authorities reported that they had more confidence in setting targets where the statistical analysis of trends/ previous performance was possible. An example was where authorities were already used to setting LPSA targets in the area of safety. This also had the opposite effect where they were not used to setting targets and had no previous experience to go on. Examples of this were where new indicators had been introduced (e.g. accessibility) or where the methodology had recently changed (e.g. maintenance) or the definition of the indicator had only recently been determined (e.g. congestion). For these indicators different strategies were required.

Authorities in both the interviews and questionnaires reported that targets had to be challenging but achievable. In the questionnaire 96% of the authorities agreed with the statement that they were more likely to maintain/increase their future funding levels if they met the targets that they set. There was less consensus on whether setting ambitious targets would have the same effect as only 58% of respondents agreed with the statement that we are likely to maintain/ increase their future funding levels if we set ambitious targets.

In addition to those strategies identified by the questionnaire the use of models was identified by the interviews as a tool used to determine the targets to be used. One authority interviewed was using a 'black box' model run by consultants to determine their mandatory targets.

“it [the black box] came back with figures for the mandatory indicators, and obviously we had no choice over these, and these were then relayed back to the project team who then said whether they thought they were feasible” (principal transport planner)

Other authorities were using models to test the feasibility of the targets that they had set.

“the multi modal transport model is testing the achievability of our targets based on the level of the funding that we have got” (head of LTP)

This evidence shows that a wide range of strategies had been used to set the targets included in LTP2 with an overriding emphasis on achievability. The next section identifies which targets the local authorities found easier/ harder to set.

Targets that were harder/ easier to set

In setting their targets authorities were asked in the questionnaire which targets they found the hardest to set and why and which they found to be the easier to set and why. Figures 2 and 3 show the results of this question. The most common targets that were cited by authorities as being difficult to set were the accessibility target and bus patronage target. Reasons given for the accessibility target being difficult can be summarised as:

- The target is reliant on external forces/ issues out of our control
- There was a limited time to do the work to get the target ready
- Access is already good/ difficult to identify any issues that could be improved over the five-year period.

These statements show how the introduction of a new indicator into the assessment has provided problems to local authorities. One of the key strategies commonly stated to counteract this was to set up stakeholder groups to discuss these problem areas.

Reasons given for why the bus patronage targets were hard to set can be summarised as:

- It is hard to forecast due to lack of data
- We have no control over the services/ operators
- Trends going in a negative direction.

The interviews mirrored these statements and found that setting targets for the bus indicators was difficult due to the need to work effectively with external stakeholders (bus companies) and for certain authorities who were experiencing a downward trend in bus use. One authority in the interview stated that they would be setting a target for bus patronage that showed no decline, as they felt anything else would be unacceptable to the DfT even though they knew that bus patronage was declining in their region.

The key reasons why authorities stated that targets were hard to set was due to lack of control, lack of past experience/ trends, changing methodologies (e.g. road condition), guidance taking too long to materialise (congestion), uncertainty of impact of schemes (bus punctuality).

The targets that were most commonly cited as being easier to set was the road safety targets (total KSI, child KSI and slight casualties). Key reasons provided for this were:

- Good records in achieving road safety targets
- Accurate baseline data/ good trend data
- National targets/ guidance available
- Already on track for achieving the targets

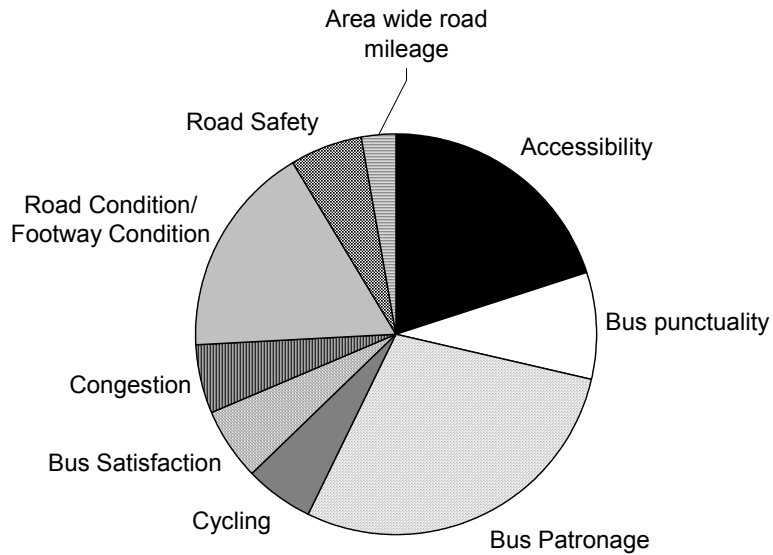


Figure 2 Difficult targets to set

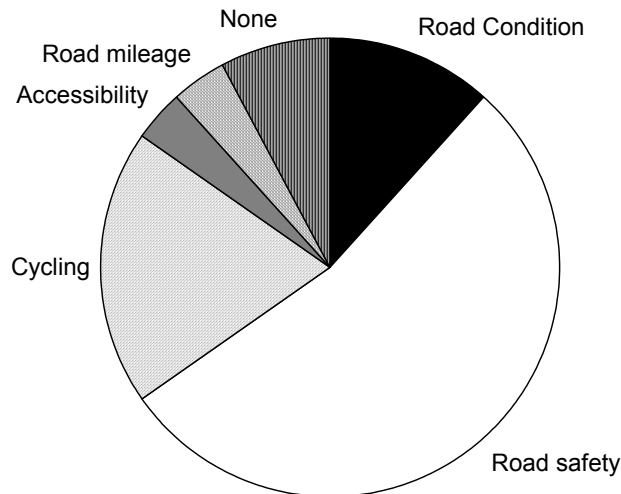


Figure 3 Easier targets to set

In contrast to the targets that were hardest to set where a message of lack of control over the target and lack of experience prevailed it is precisely these qualities (control and experience) that make certain of the targets easier to

set. In particular, agreement over definitions, accurate historic data, clear link between expenditure and impact (e.g. road condition), good records in achieving targets. The evidence shows that a range of strategies are required to complete the full suite of targets required.

The next section considers how the authorities assess the targets that they have included in their LTP2 submission and how they think that the DfT will assess them.

Assessment of targets submitted

As described earlier, the DfT will make an assessment as to whether targets are stretching, satisfactory or unsatisfactory and assign a score accordingly. The assessment at a later date will then focus on whether these targets have been achieved. This issue of classifying stretching, satisfactory and unsatisfactory targets is one of the key issues that has been considered by the research. In the questionnaire sent to the authorities, LTP officers were required to indicate for a total of 13 key targets in LT2 how they felt that the DfT would assess their targets in terms of the categories of 'unsatisfactory', 'satisfactory' and 'stretching' and then how the local authority would assess the targets from their local authorities perspective. A target level might be stretching for one authority but highly achievable for another. For example if all the authorities had been given the same requirement of a certain % increase in public transport patronage as the satisfactory level this would favor certain authorities and would certainly be very stretching for others. The authorities were asked whether they felt the targets were unsatisfactory, between unsatisfactory and satisfactory, satisfactory, between satisfactory and stretching or stretching.

Figure 4 shows the LTP officers assessment of how the DfT would assess their targets and Figure 5 the LTP officers own assessment of their targets. It is worth noting that only 16% of the authorities in the questionnaire stated that they were clear about how the DfT assessment would work. The graph shows that a number of the authorities felt that their indicators would be judged as less than satisfactory; including accessibility, public transport patronage, cycling, area wide road mileage, congestion and maintenance targets. The target that the authorities were most confident about how the DfT would assess them were the road safety targets (KSI and child KSI). This should be expected given the DfT guidelines on what a stretching, satisfactory target should be (as shown by table 2) and the local authorities past experience in setting targets for these indicators.

As should be expected, figure 5 shows that on the whole authorities judged their own targets at a significantly higher level than how they expected the DfT to judge them. In particular more targets were judged as stretching indicating that one of the key strategies used was to set targets that were stretching for their individual authorities, even where these targets may not reach the standard for stretching as judged by the DfT. It is also worth noting that certain authorities were setting targets that they felt would be judged as less than satisfactory in the eyes of both the DfT assessment and their own

assessment. These targets included accessibility, cycling trips, area wide road mileage ad air quality. This maybe in part due to the need to have a strategy that not only sets targets but recognises that they will be penalised at a later date if these targets are not then met. It would be worth investigating further whether these authorities have a strategy of setting unsatisfactory targets because they know that they will be able to achieve these and this very fact will impact on their future score/ funding levels.

Figure 4 Comparison of how local authorities felt that DfT would assess their targets

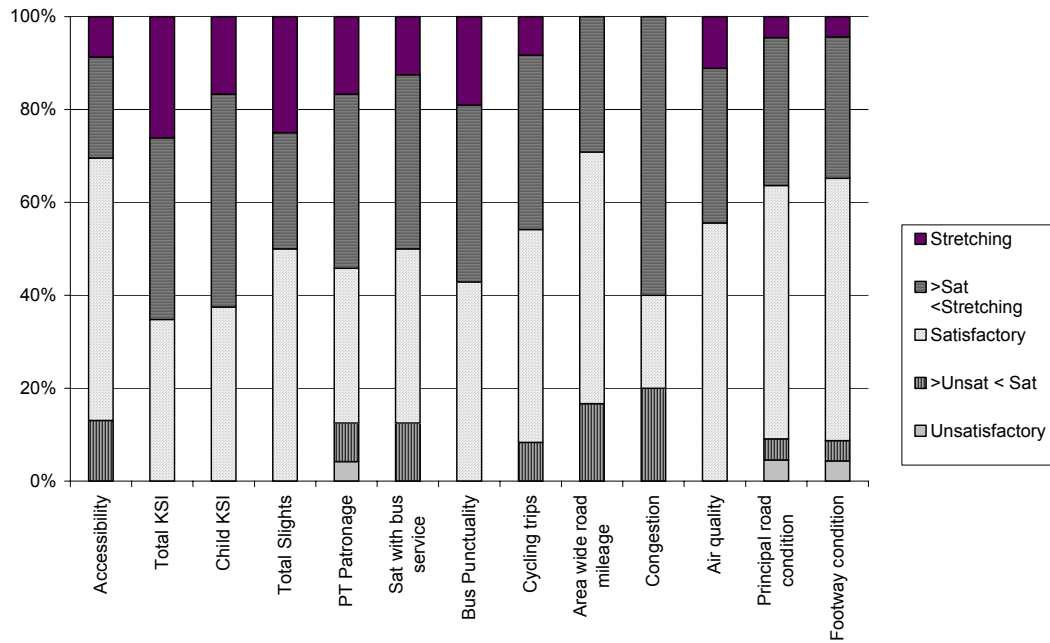


Figure 5 Comparison of how the local authorities would assess own their targets

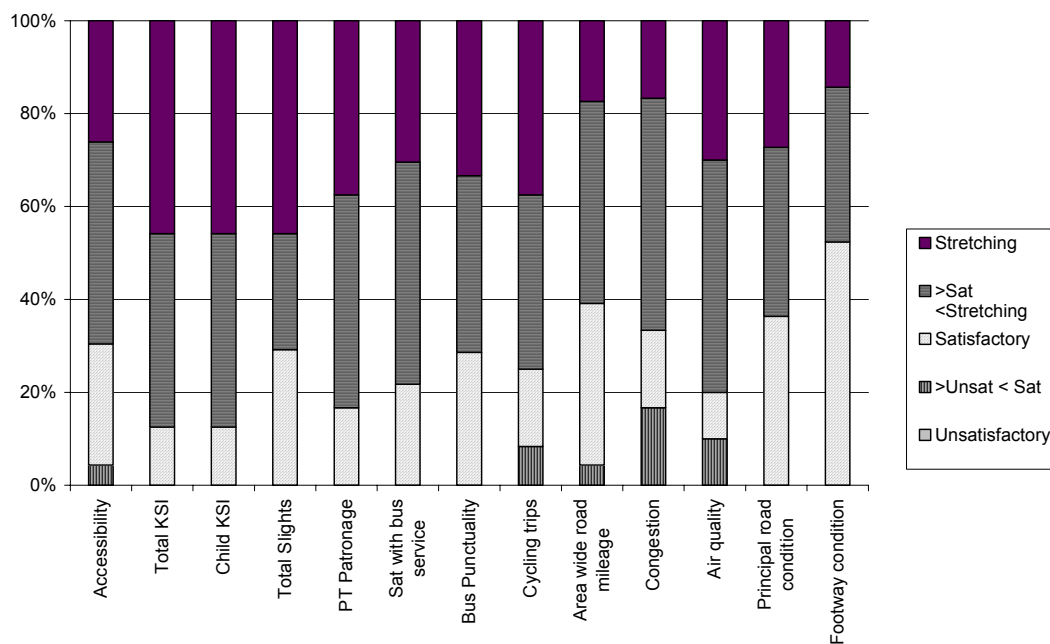
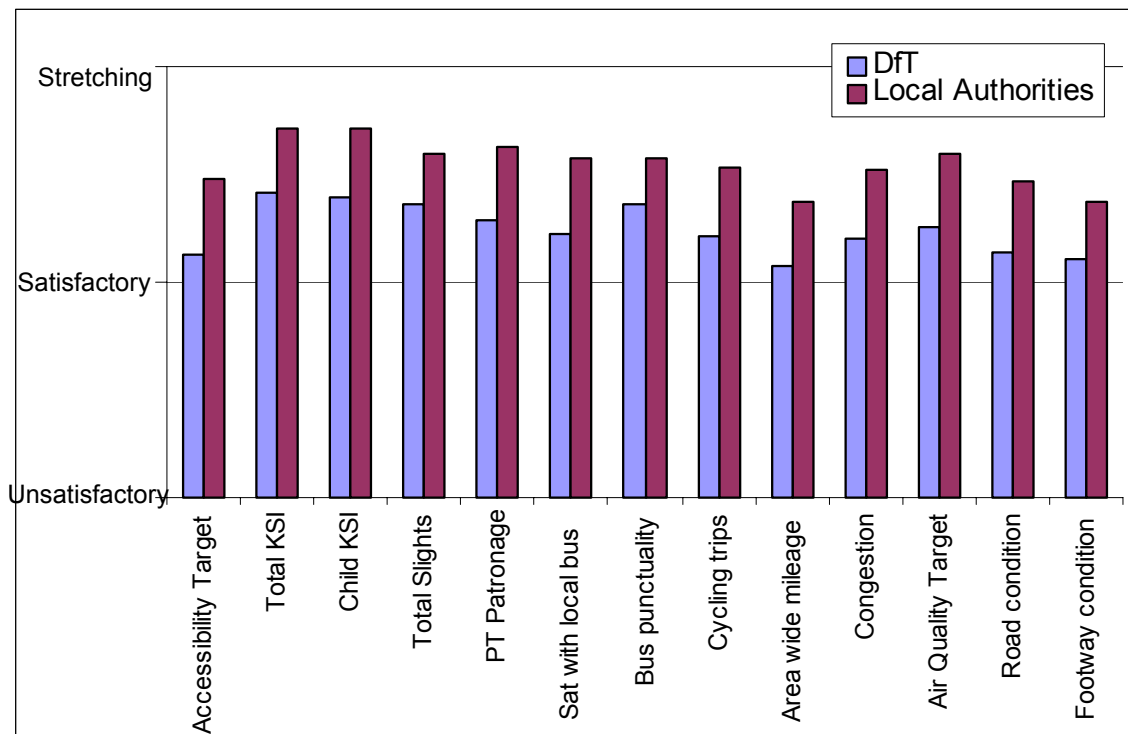


Figure 6 provides a direct comparison between the DfT assessment and the local authority assessment of the targets made by the local authorities. The questionnaire split the categories between unsatisfactory and stretching into 6 boxes that the local authorities could select. These have been converted to a 0 to 6 scale (0 = unsatisfactory, 3 = satisfactory, 6 = stretching) in order to analyse in more detail the level that each authority rated the targets. The comparison shows overwhelmingly that the authorities think that the DfT will undervalue the targets submitted in terms of stretch. When taking the authorities together it shows that on average all the targets are being judged as greater than satisfactory. It is possible to see that the road safety targets score the highest again, with area wide road mileage on average being judged as closer to satisfactory across the authorities. The two targets that show the greatest difference between the two assessments are accessibility, and satisfaction with the local bus service. Reasons for the greater difference for the accessibility targets could be that the DfT has not judged this target before in an assessment so there maybe some uncertainty over how their targets will be judged. Authorities in the interviews had reported on the problems of using the 3 yearly bus satisfaction data and this may have meant that what is satisfactory/stretching for an authority based on this data does not meet with the criteria provided in table 2 from the DfT.

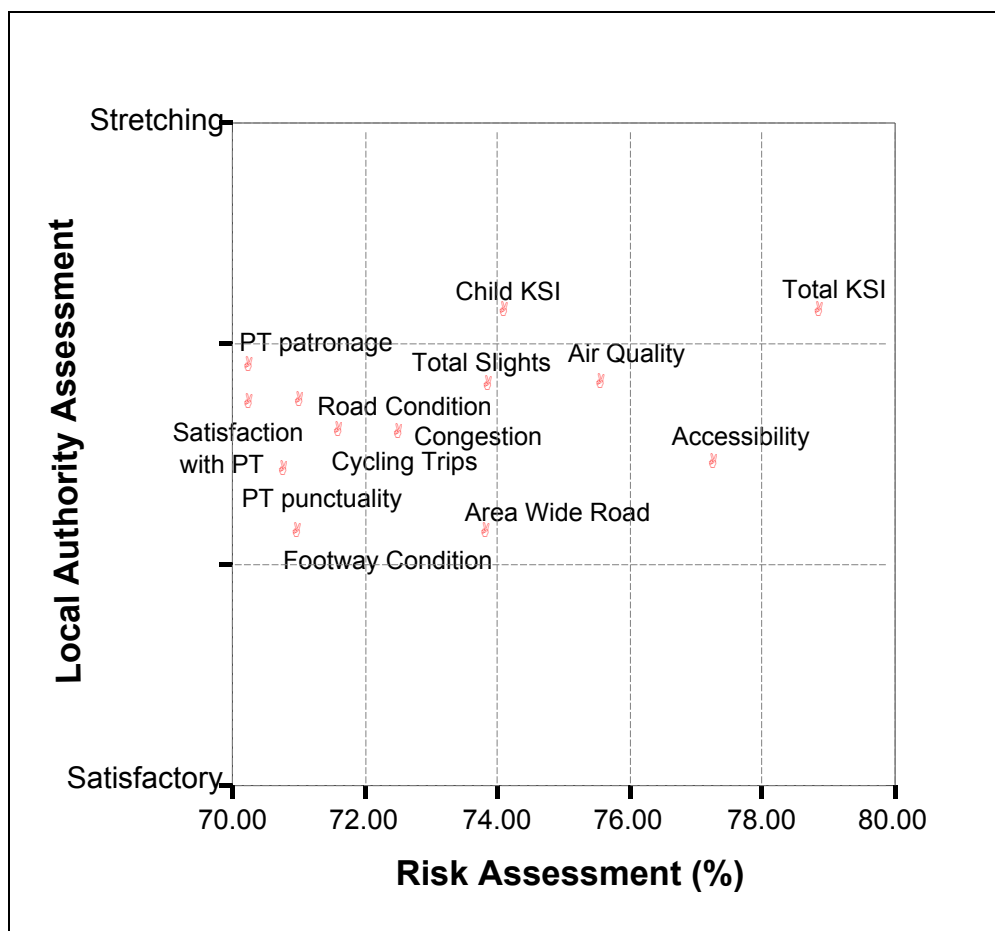
Figure 6 DfT assessment vs local authority assessment (average level across authorities)



One of the other key requirements from the DfT guidance was that authorities had to make an assessment of the risk associated with meeting their targets. Local authorities were asked in the questionnaire how likely (percentage certainty) it was that they would achieve each of the targets that they set in their LTP2 by 2010/11. The emphasis from the DfT guidance was that the

targets should be realistic, but challenging and achievable therefore it should be expected that the risk of not achieving the targets should be low. Figure 7 provides a comparison between the local authorities assessment of their targets and their assessment of how likely it will be that they will achieve these targets (average across all authorities). The average % certainty across all the targets are very close (70% - 79%) however there is much variation in whether authorities think that they will achieve certain targets. Figure 7 shows that total KSI is the target that has both been judged on average to be closer to stretching and it is also the target that on average authorities think they will achieve. In contrast they have judged footway condition to be closer to satisfactory and also have less certainty as to whether it will be achieved. All the bus targets are on the lower end of the expected achievement rates. What is interesting from these results is the high expected achievement rate for the accessibility targets. This could be in part due to the type of targets that local authorities have set themselves for this indicator, as they could select the type of indicators that was most suitable for them rather than being dictated to.

Figure 7 How likely is it that you will achieve your targets vs how stretching are your targets (average across all authorities)



A 70% chance of achieving a target in 2010/11 seems a reasonable risk given the uncertainty inherent in any transport forecast. What is perhaps more concerning from a local authorities perspective is that a number of authorities

are rating their chances of meeting certain targets in 2010/11 at only 20%. The following targets all had certain authorities stating that they had a less than 50% chance of meeting these targets; bus satisfaction, cycling trips, principle road condition and footway condition. At the other end of the scale only the road safety targets and accessibility achieved a 100% chance of being met by certain authorities.

The DfT's assessment process puts emphasis on challenging but achievable targets. The analysis on the risk of the targets set shows that authorities have a strategy of setting targets in some cases that they do not think that they can achieve and also implies that a small number are setting 'unsatisfactory' targets (in the eyes of the assessment) that they know they can achieve.

Implications of the targets on funding

The key reason for focusing on targets in the LTPs is that the DfT guidance and evidence from past performance assessments has highlighted the fact that the targets that a local authority sets and the achievement against these targets will have an impact on how their integrated transport block funding is modified by between +25% and -25%. This ultimately impacts on the capital money received by a local authority.

96% of the authorities agreed with the statement that they were more likely to increase/maintain their future funding levels if they achieved the targets that they had set. Added to this 75% stated that if they did not receive their full allocation of funding (100% formula) that they would not be able to achieve their targets in 2010/11 with the remainder of the authorities not disagreeing with this statement, but stating that they were neutral. This shows that authorities are aware that they need to set targets that they can meet, as this will impact on their funding levels. The paper has also shown that the DfT's satisfactory target thresholds for some indicators may not be feasible for certain authorities. Uncertainty surrounding how to set certain targets also means that there is some variation in whether the targets that authorities are setting will be met and also over how 'stretching' they will be judged to be. The answer to some of these questions should come in the 2006 assessment.

Conclusions

The process of target setting is relatively immature. There are exceptions to this such as road safety and road maintenance where there is a fairly clearly understood relationship between investment and outcomes. There are many other indicators where the baseline data is less clear and the knowledge about likely changes to the indicators from policy interventions less well understood. There would be some benefits to providing greater guidance on how to set targets when faced with different sets of data and model availability and understanding of processes.

75% of authorities say that getting at least 100% funding is essential to meeting targets for 2010/11. The LTP2 incentive regime 'game' is very real for

them despite the comparatively small amounts of adjustment this means in terms of overall capital spend.

The local authorities all appear to have engaged with the need to set challenging but realistic targets. It appears clear that the prospect of funding adjustments has encouraged authorities to consider what is stretching from their perspective and that there is a general understanding of the consequences of failing to achieve the targets they set. However, only 16% of authorities report being clear as to how they will be assessed which is likely to detract from the ability of the system to drive performance. Authorities are not clear exactly what the DfT wants to achieve.

The authorities clearly perceive their targets to be more ambitious than they think the DfT will assess them to be. This is partly due to the local officers' assessment of the impact of local circumstances. This raises some important issues surrounding the comparability of the ambition of different targets for different authorities. Does the DfT intend to benchmark authorities in order to assess the ambition of targets as stated – if so how?

The least stretching targets are for road mileage and congestion which suggests perhaps weaker adoption of demand management measures than the DfT expects. Greater stretch is anticipated for safety and bus service punctuality and patronage.

Some authorities have set targets which they doubt they can achieve on some specific indicators, because they perceive that DfT has minimum acceptable levels of ambition across the board - e.g. no reductions in public transport patronage. DfT has stated that it has not applied minimum acceptable levels of ambition in this way. There is some limited evidence of game playing in this regard.

In summary, the introduction of performance related settlements linked to targets alongside improved guidance for LTP2 has had a marked impact on the behaviour of local authorities in setting targets and far greater thought and sophistication has been employed in setting the targets compared with LTP1. A number of concerns have been raised about the next stages of the game when DfT passes judgement on the plans and targets. It therefore remains to be seen whether the reward and penalty scheme actually incentivises authorities to achieve or overachieve against their targets. This question is also being addressed through further research by the authors.

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