Researchers continue the search for solutions to Galway's traffic woes

Many people would agree that Galway’s traffic woes cannot be solved overnight and that the current situation is unsustainable. It is also increasingly clear that any improvement will not come by means of a singular ‘magic wand'; what is needed is a package of well thought-out, joined-up initiatives. While it’s certainly beneficial for people to walk and cycle more or to be able to avail of better public transport, these solutions are often not an option for commuters who depend on their car to travel large distances to and from their place of work in Galway City.

Social Scientists at the National University of Ireland, Galway have, over the past two years, been looking at various ways and means to encourage people to adopt more sustainable modes of travel. One element of this research focuses on the issue of teleworking, or working from home while communicating with the workplace. In the early 2000’s teleworking had been touted as a step towards reducing, or even eliminating, the daily commute to work. But it has failed to live up to these expectations. The research project investigates why teleworking has failed to resonate with many employers and employees, how companies and workers can make more informed decisions about this technology-supported way of working and what types of policies are needed to ensure that the benefits and drawbacks for individuals, wider society and the environment are adequately recognised.

The teleworking project is part of ConsEnSus, a four-year collaborative project between Trinity College Dublin and the National University of Ireland, Galway that examines four key areas of household consumption: transport, energy, water and food. The transport work package examines how people travel and how current travel patterns that are expensive, time-consuming and environmentally unsound could be changed. Mike Hynes is a member of the Consensus team investigating people’s concerns in relation to telework. “Often the focus with working from home is on technical issues and the tasks that need to be accomplished” he said. “However, many social aspects that impact on whether people can successfully work from home are overlooked. Issues such as family commitments, neighbour’s expectations and the importance of the social aspects of work are factors that need to be considered by workers and management before a person commits to teleworking. While teleworking can lead to increased productivity and has the potential to greatly improve people’s work/life balance, it also has considerable drawbacks. Issues such as longer working hours, the blurring of boundaries between work and leisure, unrealistic management expectations and experiences of isolation among some teleworkers are all areas of legitimate concern. Both management and employees need to be fully aware of all the issues involved to make teleworking both fair and acceptable to the people involved.”

Galway’s traffic problems can sometimes seem intractable but to leave things as they are is not an option. “We need sustainable solutions that will benefit Galway well into the future” said Dr Henrique Rau who is a lecturer in the School of Political Science and Sociology and who is heading transport research. “Looking at practical ways and using tools that are readily available is very important. Mobile devices and information and communication technologies are already an integral part of everyday life for many people in Galway. Working from home could potentially benefit employees, employers and the environment by reducing the need to commute to work” she said.

Research into teleworking and teleworker’s concerns is continuing. “I am very interested in hearing from people who are currently working from home or who have teleworked in the past” said Mike Hynes. “People who are engaged with working from home have firsthand insight into the issues involved and I would love to hear from people who are willing to share their experience and knowledge to further this research project”. Mike Hynes can be contacted by e-mailing info@consensus.ie.

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