Is there really a standard answer?

Do maximum parking standards make any difference? **Steve Melia** sheds some light on this often knotty policy argument


Steve Melia

When communities secretary Eric Pickles abolished Labour's (already weakened) national parking standards in 2011, he cloaked his announcement in the language of localism: "We're getting out of the way and it's up to councils to set the right parking policy for their area." But, of course, politicians only "get out of the way" when they believe this will move things in their preferred direction. Three years later, the Coalition's intellectual heavyweight stepped back into the way, telling councils to "ensure more parking spaces are provided alongside new homes" and threatening "further action" against councils that think localism gives them the right to disagree.

Maximum parking standards were one of three measures introduced in the early years of the previous Labour government, which had a profound effect on the shape of urban Britain and (as I will analyse a book coming out this year) on transport trends. The other two changes were targets for brownfield development and minimum densities for new housing. The objectives of those policies were to reduce traffic generation and loss of greenfield land.

In scrapping the brownfield and density guidance, the Coalition ministers ignored the original objectives, but the parking announcement was accompanied by a claim from decentralisation minister Greg Clark that the policy had failed: "Limiting the number of drives and garages in new homes doesn't make cars disappear – it just clogs residential roads with parked cars."

Is that claim justified, or misleading? That is one of many questions addressed by the recent book *Parking Issues and Policies*, to which I have contributed a chapter.

Amongst a wealth of information and analysis, some of the authors in *Parking Issues and Policies* provide different perspectives on that question. Greg Marsden reviews international literature that suggests parking limitations in urban areas results in fewer trips, makes car clubs more viable and encourages travel by other modes. David Leibling acknowledges that parking restraint "may have affected" the downward trends in London's car ownership, but he downplays its significance and calls for more residential parking in London.

> **66 If authorities are unable or unwilling to effectively control parking, then how could parking standards have any impact on car ownership or use? 99**

Those calls have been made before by developers the Berkeley Group, in a report called 'Does Car Ownership Increase Car Use?' From a study of just 15 new developments (two of which had missing data), the Berkeley report concludes that "there is no apparent relationship between levels of car ownership and levels of recorded car use".

As with many contentious transport issues, a debate that is really about political values and financial interests has been disguised by arguments – sometimes technical, sometimes spurious – over empirical evidence. To paraphrase the Scottish poet Andrew Lang, vested interests use evidence as a drunken man uses lamp-posts for support rather than illumination. So what does the evidence really show, and what conclusions might we draw from it?

Firstly, the title of the Berkeley report is, if taken literally, ludicrous. It invites us to believe that people who don't own cars might drive as much as people who do. That claim is easily refuted by the National Travel Survey. People who have no cars in their household occasionally borrow or hire a car but their average annual mileage is tiny – just 1% of the distance driven by the 'main driver', or 4% of the distance driven by 'other drivers', in households with one or more cars. Wealthy non-car owners in swish London apartments (like those sold by the Berkeley Group) probably drive more than the average, but to claim that they drive as much as car owners in similar situations is fanciful. Once we acknowledge those facts, the relevance of evidence to this debate changes.

Some studies have shown strong relationships between different measures of parking capacity and car ownership and/or car use. Other studies show no relationship or a relatively weak one. There is no contradiction between those findings. Those studies which find no apparent relationship suggest that either:

- Parking capacity was sufficient to satisfy demand in all the places surveyed, or:
- The measures of parking capacity used were wrong – possibly because people were able to park outside the area of measurement

The second of those points brings us back to the political debate over maximum parking standards. The guidance published by the last Labour government was flawed. It introduced a guideline maximum of 1.5 off-road spaces per new dwelling (PPG3, 2000) and a principle that parking policy should "promote sustainable transport choices [and] reduce the land-take of development" (PPG13, 2001). Those principles would have been very sensible had they come with a corollary: where parking capacity is insufficient to satisfy unconstrained demand, parking in the surrounding area must be effectively controlled.

If authorities are unable, or unwilling, to effectively control parking, then how could parking standards have any impact on car ownership or use? Reducing capacity without effective controls is bound to cause parking chaos. Whoever imagined that it wouldn't?

So the debate over whether parking standards influence traffic and travel is largely spurious – clearly, they can do, where they are set below the natural level of demand and are effectively enforced. The real issues for debate are whether, where and how parking standards ought to be used to reduce car ownership, traffic generation and the sprawl of cities. That debate is more about values than evidence. It is about the sort of cities and the sort of country that we want to live in.

Steve Melia is senior lecturer in Transport & Planning at University of the West of England. His book, Urban Transport Without the Hot Air, will be published by UIT Cambridge in May. He contributed the chapter 'Car Free and Low Car Development' to Parking Issues and Policies (Emerald, 2014).