

Zurich Financial Services – Sustainable Transport Planning

Company background

Zurich is an insurance-based financial services company providing investment, protection, pensions and insurance for employers, business and personal customers and brokers. One of the world's leading financial services groups, Zurich employs 57,000 staff in more than 50 countries. Nearly 15% of its staff is based in the UK.

Zurich believes that it needs to set high standards of responsibility and integrity towards its employees, communities, society and the environment. The company is mindful of environmental risks, exposures, and opportunities in its business activities (e.g. risk management, product design, loss prevention, claims handling, asset management) and within its own internal operations.

In 2002, Zurich signed-up to the Government's programme "Making a Corporate Commitment" (MACC2) and declared targets for reduction in greenhouse gas emissions and waste production. The group's priorities are energy conservation, waste minimisation and the development of integrated transport plans.

Driving change

It is estimated that traffic congestion costs the UK economy more than £18 billion per year in lost working hours and productivity. In addition to cost savings and increased productivity, Zurich's desire to change staff travel patterns was driven by recruitment and retention, building consolidation and parking needs, and its energy and emissions commitments made through the MACC2 programme.

Taking advantage of free on-site travel planning consultancy offered by the Energy Saving Trust, a government-funded organisation providing support to businesses on road transport matters, Zurich committed to develop and implement travel plans for 40% of its UK employees across four key corporate centres in the UK. The Energy Saving Trust advice scheme linked Zurich to consultants who provided advice to Zurich's key sites. The company's sustainable transport targets were then incorporated into its overall Environmental Plan and implemented by the Environmental Operations Group. The company's Environmental Adviser ensures that implementation is seen as part of a continuous process and that further issues are identified and dealt with on an ongoing basis.

Travel plan development

As an overall goal, Zurich wanted to reduce the impact of commuter and business travel as well as car parking pressures at its sites. To start the process, staff travel surveys were conducted. Employees were incentivised to participate through a prize draw which they could enter by submitting their completed questionnaire. The first travel survey at Fareham found that a staggering 84% of staff drove to work on their own, and used their car largely because of the lack of alternative means of transport. The travel survey at Swindon revealed that 20% of staff were prepared to practically support a travel plan and 67% of car drivers would consider alternative methods of transport. Many people reportedly had difficulties in travelling to work due to congestion, parking and public transport reliability, so there was significant scope for improvement.

Most importantly, surveys revealed that each of the four main sites (Swindon, Portsmouth, Fareham and Cheltenham) was unique, with individual characteristics, opportunities and problems. As such, a mix of company-wide and local measures was needed to create successful travel plans.

Zurich established travel forums at each main site to encourage ownership and integration of the travel plans into their local business operations. Each forum meets quarterly and has 10-15 permanent members including:

- A local travel plan coordinator;
- An environmental adviser;
- A human resources manager;
- A communications adviser;
- An employee representative from every major department; and
- A director from Group Property Services.

The major benefit of managing travel plans at each site is the opportunity to develop local partnerships, particularly with bus operators, travel plan networks and councils. As part of their wider commitment, Zurich joined the Association for Commuter Transport (ACT), which provides an opportunity to share experiences and examples of best practice.

To raise staff awareness, boards were placed at each site to explain the role of travel plans in tackling the company's transport issues. By seeking employee opinions, Zurich was able to secure their involvement at an early stage.

In 2003, Zurich consolidated its operations in Cheltenham. This involved relocating staff from two offices in the centre of Cheltenham to a new office on the outskirts of the town. With fewer parking spaces, one key challenge was to reduce the number of staff commuting by car.

Key initiatives

Zurich's Cheltenham site in particular demonstrates the benefits a company can gain from travel plans, particularly in relation to inter-office travel, site relocations and improved accessibility for staff and visitors. Several sustainable transport measures have now been successfully implemented at Cheltenham.

A free bus provides a direct transport link between Cheltenham centre and the company's building. For those travelling to the office from locations further away the bus is not a feasible alternative, therefore car sharing played a central role and was promoted through the company's intranet and notice boards. Additionally, staff can access software which allows them to find suitable car share partners. Car sharers are rewarded with preferential parking spaces and supported by guaranteed rides home (the company will pay the cost of a taxi if the employee has no other way to get home).

A new car park management system was introduced at Cheltenham to prioritise access for those in need of a car parking space. The system is based on points and takes into account a range of factors including participation in car sharing, home location, personal circumstances (e.g. health, childcare) and whether employees have access to alternative travel options. This scheme ensures priority is given to people who most need a space and has been well received by employees.

The company now runs free shuttles and buses between many of its sites and local railway stations. As an incentive for staff to use buses, Zurich has offered a discounted Travel Pass Scheme which enables employees to get an interest-free Season Ticket Loan and travel on local public buses in the evenings and weekends as well as for work. Feedback from bus users is encouraged in order to help continually improve service.

The car sharing database "Jambusters" is now being used across all of Zurich's UK sites. This easy on-line registration system is accessible via the intranet and functions somewhat like a computer dating service with the important criteria including things like "days and hours of travel" and "smoker or non-smoker". At most sites, car sharers are allowed to park for free directly in front of the office in spaces normally be reserved for the Directors.

At its Swindon site, Zurich is aiming to quadruple the number of cycle trips to the office from 1% in 2002 to 4% by 2007. A large proportion of its staff at the Swindon office live within two miles of the town centre and the surrounding land is relatively flat and easy for cycling. In addition to improving employee health, this measure can reduce parking needs drastically, as 8 bicycles can fit into one single parking space. Zurich has already upgraded the provision of cycle racks, lockers, showers and changing facilities on site and is in negotiations with the local council for better cycling routes.

Video conferencing has been particularly popular across Zurich's sites and has helped to significantly reduce the regular trips between the corporate centres.

Results

In the first two and a half years, Zurich has made significant progress in reducing the number of staff travelling alone by car. In 2003, an online survey was sent to 608 people across the four locations. The response rate was an impressive 59%. The survey showed that over the last 12 months 23% of its workforce had moved from solitary car use to an alternative mode of transport.

At Cheltenham, the proportion of staff arriving alone by car has fallen by over 10% while bus use, car sharing, walking and motorcycle use have all increased. Promoting car sharing has been particularly successful. Support for the Jambusters scheme was rapid, with 550 people signing up to the journey share software within days of its launch. The Jambusters software is now being used not just at these four locations but throughout Zurich's UK branch network.

The use of audio and video conferencing has reduced annual business mileage by over a million miles, with fuel cost savings of £122,000 and an extra 17,000 working hours being created.

Zurich's travel plans won the private sector category of the 2004 Association of Commuter Transport Awards. As the travel plans have become more established, Zurich has continued to monitor progress by asking for feedback, both via email, repeat travel surveys and in person.