

The  
**ISSUES**  
Project

# SUE Success Stories: DISTILLATE

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Decision-making tool and  
knowledge transfer.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

DISTILLATE (Design and Implementation Support Tools for Integrated Local land Use, Transport and the Environment) was part of the first wave of consortia selected by the UK Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council for funding as part of the Sustainable Urban Environments (SUE) programme. It ran from 2004 to 2008. The overall goal of the project was to deliver, “a step change in the way in which sustainable urban transport and land-use strategies are developed and delivered.”(May, 2009)

DISTILLATE was broken down into seven project areas, each looking at different aspects of producing sustainable urban transport policies, and each producing a series of tools, guidebooks, and models aimed at assisting local transport planners. One key output, in terms of encouraging practitioners to make use of the various DISTILLATE products, was the creation of the *DISTILLATE Decision Making Tool*. This is a tool whose design and implementation mostly came via DISTILLATE project partners the Stockholm Environment Institute and the Transport Research Laboratory. It is intended for use by local authorities and for consultancies acting on their behalf (specifically Public Transport Executives (PTEs) and their equivalents) and its purpose, broadly, is to direct policy makers and planners to appropriate guidance in sustainable transport planning. In a sense, the tool is an over-arching piece of kit: it exists to meet DISTILLATE’s goals by directing practitioners to the more specific DISTILLATE tools that they may benefit from. It provided a framework, then, for bringing together the outputs from DISTILLATE and from other researchers, and for providing access to research findings.

As with many of the DISTILLATE outputs, the tool has been put together in consultation with stakeholders throughout its development, and has ended up being utilised both by those local authorities who were involved with DISTILLATE and by agents without direct connection to the consortium. The purpose of this report is to look at both these aspects - the involvement of stakeholders and the end product’s utilisation - and to consider the links between them. Its focus is the DISTILLATE outputs as a group, but special attention is paid to the decision-making tool, since this has often served as a gateway to the other work of the consortium.

## 2. SUCCESS STORY

Perhaps DISTILLATE’s most significant dissemination outlet has been the Department for Transport’s (DfT) *Guidance on Local Transport Plans* document. This is a government guidebook aimed at local transport planners and councillors, with respect to their *Local Transport Plans* for the 2011 to 2026 period (LTP3). DISTILLATE tools are recommended by the DfT (with the decision-making tool as a starting point) as a source of guidance in several different areas such as performance monitoring, fund-raising, option generating, and establishing partnerships. (DfT, 2009).

The institutionalisation of LTPs is particularly important to DISTILLATE’s dissemination. LTPs were brought in as part of the Transport Act (2000) as a device to ensure that local authorities gave due attention to longer term transport planning. DfT demand that LTPs are produced periodically, with the intention that they will press local authorities into meeting mandatory standards, whilst allowing enough flexibility for specifically local objectives to be met. This has led to a transport planning system that is both decentralised and comprehensive, and which DISTILLATE has been able to tap into.

This approach demands guidance from a central authority, to ensure that LTPs are ambitious yet achievable. DISTILLATE has positioned itself brilliantly here, in that they are frequently referenced in the DfT's key guidance document. The transport planning set-up in England has brought about a collection of quasi-independent local bodies, all with an obligation to create considered and far-reaching plans, and the key advice document for producing these plans directs them to DISTILLATE's work.

It could be argued that DfT's role here is largely that of a knowledge broker, in that they are acting as an intermediary between the knowledge producers (DISTILLATE) and the end users (local transport planners.) Alternatively, one could see DISTILLATE's prominence in the guide as a success in itself, such is the influence of these guidance notes amongst transport planners in England. DISTILLATE has essentially been recommended by the body that dictates how councils' transport plans be made, so this represents an influence at the very heart of local transport policy. The research group have secured a powerful advocate in DfT.

Numerous local authorities have been using DISTILLATE's outputs to varying degrees. For example, councils and transport bodies in areas such as East Sussex, Merseyside, Staffordshire and Bradford have all engaged with DISTILLATE products. It should be noted that most of the local authorities interviewed as part of the study do not use the DISTILLATE products in their entirety; rather it seems more common for them to look at the tools and use parts of them for their own purposes. For instance, the Merseyside Partnership use the option generation software as a guide to identifying key issues in their area, whereas East Sussex County Council have used the small scheme assessment tools and reports for technical guidance in appraising travel schemes. (Grant, 2010, Wheeler, 2010)

### 3. DISSEMINATION AND ENGAGEMENT PLANS

DISTILLATE's outputs reached policy makers via several different pathways, and this was underpinned by a diverse set of engagement efforts. Central to their plans was the close involvement of local authorities (LAs). DISTILLATE brought together a group of 16 local authority partners, and undertook a scoping study with them at the outset of the project, with the purpose of identifying possible issues for research. This brought about the seven project areas (May, et al., 2008). One can see then, that external partners were not used merely to fine-tune research outputs, but rather that they were crucial in determining the purpose and structure of the project as whole.

Three further surveys were undertaken of these 16 authorities throughout the life of the projects, and augmented by in-depth telephone interviews. The aim here was to obtain a more detailed understanding of the difficulties that transport planners faced in addressing sustainability concerns, and to keep abreast of changes in their opinions (Hull, 2009). More specific insight was gained into these difficulties through a series of around 20 case studies, done in collaboration with the relevant authorities (May, et al., 2008). Clearly, engagement with LAs was a major strategy throughout the DISTILLATE project.

The seven sub-projects within DISTILLATE were managed with a fair degree of autonomy, albeit with strong cooperation and coordination across the projects, and there were

individual dissemination directives for each one. For example, the team behind the decision-making tool selected the Local Transport Planning Network (LTPN) website as “the principal dissemination facility” for the tool, because it was identified as “the principal information source...for UK local authorities” (Forrester, 2009, May, 2009, May, et al., 2008). Having identified LTPN as a crucial information source, the project team successfully campaigned to have the decision making tool hosted on their website.

## 4. DISSEMINATION PROCESS

### 4.1) Pathways

DISTILLATE’s dissemination plans were multi-faceted as we have seen and, as one would expect, this has led to their outputs reaching end-users through multiple pathways. Four key pathways have been recognised here: personal connections, official endorsement, formal engagement, and industry specific dissemination.

#### 4.1.1) *Personal connections*

As is often the case with knowledge exchange, networks of professional contacts have been important to DISTILLATE’s dissemination. There have been instances where personal connections have revealed aligned interests that have profited both researchers and end-users. For instance, DISTILLATE researcher Karen Lucas first met Neil Anderson, then of the South Yorkshire Public Transport Executive (SYTPE), at a DfT seminar. Their shared views became apparent, they kept each other informed of relevant events, and they subsequently realised the value to both DISTILLATE and SYTPE of collaborating on an option generating project in Barnsley. As a result, DISTILLATE was able to produce tools based on public consultation in an appropriate setting (Anderson, 2010).

Personal connections can also have the potential to cut across different organisations. Murray Grant’s first involvement with DISTILLATE came when he was asked, in his capacity as Chief Policy Officer at Mersey Travel, to be a part of the initial scoping study. Grant later moved on to the Merseyside Partnership, where he personally encouraged the use of DISTILLATE in their LTP2 and LTP3 work. (Grant, 2010). Here we can see an example where a personal link has contributed to awareness of DISTILLATE in a new environment.

#### 4.1.2) *Official endorsement*

Again, this owed something to a personal connection since Principal Investigator Tony May was able to access his longstanding contacts at DfT to encourage the promotion of DISTILLATE (Forrester, 2010). Its placement in the LTP3 guidance notes drew attention to the group’s outputs as one would expect, but it also served to legitimise them. Murray Grant told of how the DISTILLATE’s endorsement by the DfT encouraged the Merseyside Partnership to use it:

We’d been looking for something that had a pedigree as a starting point, and the fact that it came out of the DfT sponsored project, and it was something that Mersey Travel had been involved with gave it a certain justification that made people comfortable that this was the right list to use, really.(Grant, 2010)

One can see then, that the medium used to convey the tools' existence was crucial, the cachet of being recommended in an official publication provided the "justification" to use it.

#### *4.1.3) Formal dissemination*

Pre-arranged workshops and collaborative efforts have also helped DISTILLATE to reach a wider audience. As mentioned above, Murray Grant's use of the tool stems from his involvement in the early scoping studies. At the other end of the timeline, Staffordshire County Council, who have adapted certain DISTILLATE tools for their own use in putting together LTP3, first became aware of the group through their *UK Dissemination Workshop* held at DfT in January 2008, at the end of the project (Swinerton, 2010).

#### *4.1.4) Industry specific dissemination*

DISTILLATE also gained successful exposure by targeting intermediaries that they believed to be preferred by end-users. Jon Wheeler at East Sussex County Council, believes that DISTILLATE first came to their attention via a piece written by Tony May for *Local Transport Today*, an influential trade journal. The decision-making tool's appearance on the LTPN website raised DISTILLATE's profile further in his department (Wheeler, 2010).

## **4.2) Barriers**

#### *4.2.1) Impracticalities of finished products*

Despite the DISTILLATE tools being used by several local authorities, some councils have commented that the finished tools failed to adequately bridge the academia-practice gap. Nicola Swinerton, the Transport Policy Manager at Staffordshire County Council, felt that the tools on the DISTILLATE website were too theoretical to be used effectively, and that their academic language made it difficult for practitioners to understand them (Swinerton, 2010). A similar comment came from Ann Beddoes at Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council, who suggested that the language was too academic for both the council and the local community to engage with fully (Beddoes, 2010). An interesting finding here, is that similar comments have come from both councils who have no connection with DISTILLATE, and those who have been involved in collaborative projects. This suggests that there remains work to be done to make academic outputs more palatable to end-users, despite the efforts at engagement throughout the project.

#### *4.2.2) - Fragility of professional relationships*

Personal connections are vitally important in knowledge exchange, but circumstances can change, and researchers must be aware of this. Mersey Travel's involvement with DISTILLATE centred on their former Chief Policy Officer Murray Grant, and it seems that they were less closely involved once Grant had moved on from that post. Grant stated that he was disappointed with the level of involvement after his departure; Mersey Travel continued to be involved, "just not at the level I would have liked" (Grant, 2010). This highlights the importance of establishing multiple contacts within important organisations and the dangers of over-reliance on key individuals.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The success of DISTILLATE's knowledge transfer is rooted in two factors; the stature of their dissemination channels and the multi-faceted nature of their engagement plans. Professor Tony May is a hugely experienced figure in the transport planning sector, and as a result he has earned access to some very influential contacts. It is largely through these contacts that DISTILLATE have made themselves visible in the field, specifically through significant mediums such as *Local Transport Today*, LTPN, and especially DfT's guidance notes for LTP3 (Forrester, 2010).

Their engagement and dissemination plans have been multi-directional, in that they have involved councils, consultancies and communities. These engagements have been augmented with formal dissemination events and seminars. This has meant that there has been multiple ways for end-users to become aware of the work that DISTILLATE did. The combination of these two factors has been crucial. DISTILLATE effectively adopted a two-level strategy that targeted LAs in two ways – by getting them involved directly, and by fostering relations with a powerful advocate capable of influencing their decisions.

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