

Swedish NGO wins the Oscar

Author: Christopher Evans, MindsinMotion.net<christopher.evans@mindsinmotion.net>

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are essential in the drive to make transport sustainable in the future. Just ask Oscar Alarik, who says if it wasn't for the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation, the city's much-vaunted congestion charge would not be in place.

As former deputy head of the Congestion Charge Secretariat in Stockholm, Oscar Alarik oversaw the introduction of the congestion charge in the Scandinavian city. He must have been impressed witnessing at first hand the vital role the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation (SSNC) played, because he joined the organisation two years ago.

[F069 Image 1](#)

That explains

The SSNC boasts 184,000 members and 274 local branches across the whole country. That's a lot of members for a relatively small country (Sweden's total population is nine million), and at least partly explains how the organisation was able to play such an influential part in getting the congestion charge introduced.

All of the SSNC's members and branches help to raise awareness about environmental damage, suggest ways of tackling these problems and lobby the government to get off their backsides and do something – experience which the NGO put to good effect in the campaign for the congestion charge.

Heart transplant

“A great deal of lobbying was needed, because this was not a popular issue and media coverage was very disparaging. Bringing the charge in was like trying to transplant a heart into a body that was intent on rejecting it,” says Oscar, in a nice, if somewhat gory analogy.

Oscar says the SSNC had a tough job on its hands trying to get the public to believe in the system and get the press on their side, ahead of the public referendum. This wasn't helped by the fact that in Sweden the congestion charge is not a charge at all, but a tax. And as municipalities in the Scandinavian country are not allowed to create new taxes, the Stockholm road pricing had to be introduced as a government tax. People were in effect voting for a tax increase – never a popular policy.

The SSNC worked on several fronts to overcome these hurdles. It formulated reports on how to

implement a system for congestion charging and developed various systems that could be used. It also commissioned Transek, a consultancy firm specialising in transport analysis, to perform model simulations of the effects of the charging.

The society undertook its own research to gauge public opinion on road pricing systems, embarked on a media campaign to promote the benefits of a congestion charge, sought government funding for research and offered recommendations to the Environmental Advisory Council, which counsels the Swedish government on environmental issues.

“For a long time the SSNC was busy laying the foundations for the system,” says Oscar.

The hard work paid off, though. The congestion charge was voted in via a public referendum and was implemented in January 2006. Stockholm traffic is now down by fifteen per cent and emissions in the inner city are down by fourteen per cent.

[F069 Image 2](#)

Designer solutions

With the benefit of his experiences, Oscar says one thing he has learnt is that sustainable transport solutions have to be designed to match the city, not the other way around.

“There is no blueprint that can be replicated across the world. A model that works in one country may not be suitable in another,” he says.

Oscar cites the example of London, where the congestion charge is much higher because it's largely around the city's financial and commercial centre. In Stockholm, however, it affects a large number of residential areas, so the charge needs to be lower.

“It can be hard politically and legally to change the charging amounts once they are in place, so the model has to be right from the start, and you've got to have the faith to stick with it, even in the face of criticism,” he says.

Support

Oscar says that the next Swedish city to follow suit could be Gothenburg, where local authorities

have already announced their support for a congestion charging scheme. So it looks like he and his colleagues at the SSNC could be spending a lot of time in Sweden's second city over the next couple of years.