JONATHAN BRAY

Getting beyond the MaaS hysteria

City regions will have a key role to play in determining whether Mobility as a Service succeeds and makes a positive contribution

▶ I don't know about you but I've seen more than enough Power Points by now explaining with breathless excitement what Mobility as a Service (MaaS) is - as if no-one had ever heard about it before. And as if frequent repetition of the phrase in itself has alchemic properties which render immaterial base considerations as economics. So in the report we recently published on MaaS we've tried to get beyond the MaaS hysteria and delve deeper into the real issues on turning the considerable potential of the concept into reality on the ground.

However, first it's worth acknowledging how understanding of what people mean when they say Mobility as a Service has shifted in recent years. When this clumsy technocratic phrase (which unfortunately we are all now stuck with) first emerged it was commonly understood to mean the purchasing of packages for access to public transport combined with different forms of vehicle hire and sometimes bikes. It has since morphed to include portals for access to information and purchase of individual trips, and further evolved into the potential for the creation of 'walled gardens' where international corporations seek to ensure that you always go to them for transport information and payment (thus seeking to reproduce the monopoly platform model that has ultimately proved so profitable for Airbnb, Amazon, Google et al).

So far, despite all the fervour and theology about MaaS, what's been achieved on the ground so far is rather less clear cut. At scale take up of MaaS (as originally defined as packages of mobility) is difficult to find. Indeed we are at a point where the future of MaaS is still to be determined. It could be a system that steers people towards greater use of cars or away from them. It could make travelling easier for all, no matter their income, disability or location, or it could make mobility easier for tech-savvy, city centre dwellers and harder for those who are already excluded and marginalised. It could be a great concept that takes off at scale or one that people don't need or want in practice.

Our report identified three factors that will determine the future of MaaS. The first is the topic that nobody seems to want to talk about when it comes to MaaS - which is money. The challenge for MaaS (where this means packages of mobility) is how you price the package at a rate where all the different providers involved make a return at a price the punters are willing to pay. Not easy unless either the public sector or the private sector is prepared to take a hit to ensure that cost is kept low.

A purely private sector-led MaaS could be prepared to burn cash in the short term in the hope of establishing a profitable monopoly in the long term. A purely public sector-led MaaS may be willing to do the same because the outcomes are worth the costs.

And then there's the awkward question of how many people want to buy a package of mobility in the first place, rather than pay as they go - and who are they? Not clear yet. However I always remember speaking to the person who runs the MaaS offer in a German city where the transport authority has been doing what is now described as MaaS for years and he said he thought it was good to be able to offer it, but it's a niche product. He said most people will get a taxi when they want one rather than pay up front for access to taxis they may not use. One radical viewpoint on the economics of MaaS is that the real breakthrough would be to fuse MaaS with the pricing of road use to put paying to use your own car on contested and congested road space on the same app and pricing framework as for public transport, taxis and car hire.

The second make or break for MaaS is access to data. This factor is much more commonly covered in the debate on MaaS - so I won't go into detail here. But with data now commonly seen as the earth's most valuable commodity there are some big questions around how you get to the point of 'if I show you mine will you show me yours?'

The third determinant is around the extent to which wider environmental, transport and social goals are encoded into the objectives of MaaS schemes. So, alongside the consumer benefits of a MaaS scheme to what extent does it relate to the wider goals that cities have to become healthier, greener, fairer and more prosperous places? For example, will MaaS schemes encourage people to make more short journeys on foot or by bike (good for public health and for reducing road congestion) or will they subtly promote the use of modes which can be more readily monetised for profit (such as taxis). The same risk is there for public transport if MaaS schemes promote taxi and hire car use at the expense of buses in particular.

Another big question is the extent to which MaaS schemes will also enable everyone in a city region to access opportunity or whether they default to targeting wealthier, city centre living early adopters?

If MaaS is about more than just those who already have the luxury of choice on transport

FIVE TESTS FOR MAAS

1. Does it incentivise public transport use?
2. Does it reduce congestion and pollution?
3. Is there a culture of openness/data sharing?
4. Is it socially inclusive?
5. Does it encourage active lifestyles?

A visualisation of Mobility as a Service. Source: Urban Transport Group 'MaaS Movement: Issues and options on Mobility as a Service for city region transport authorities'
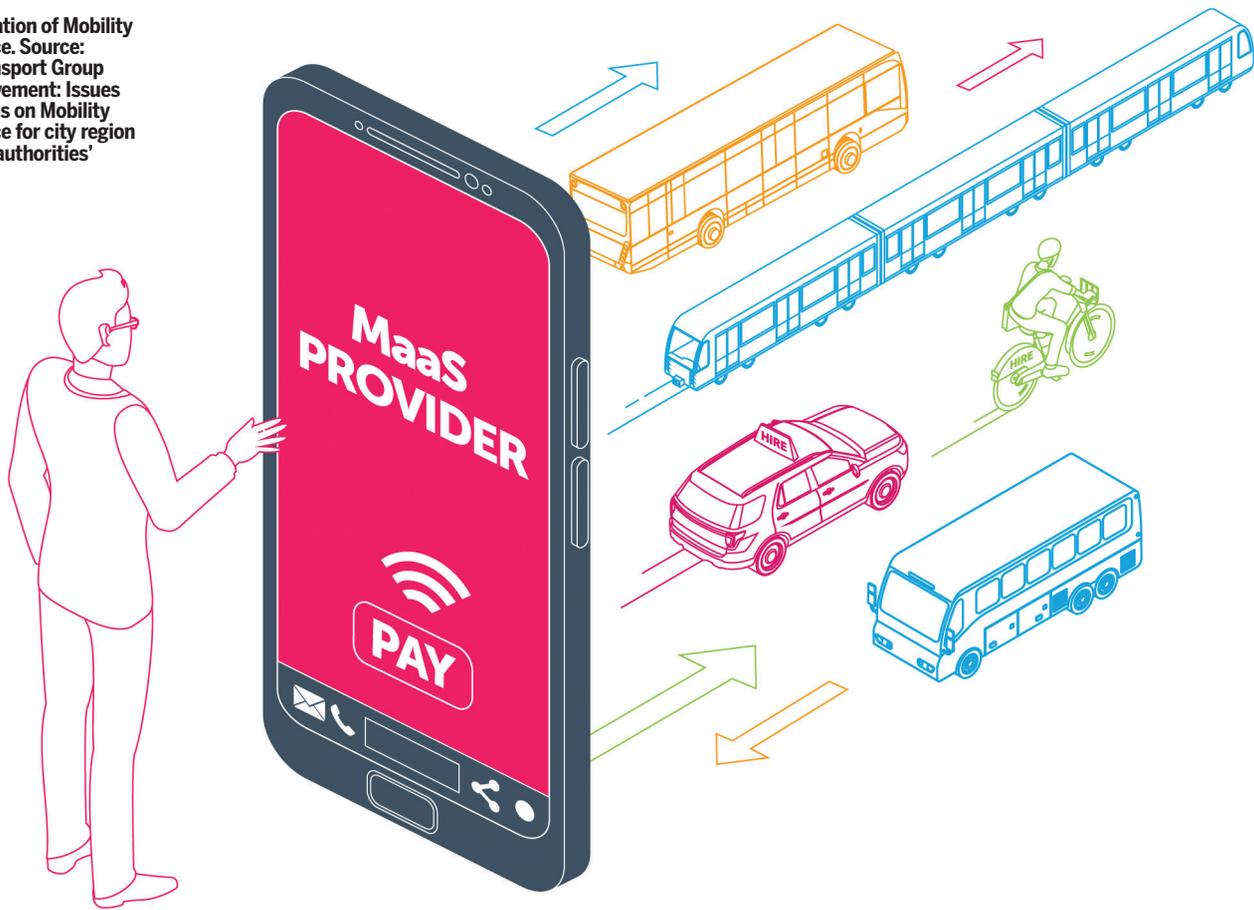
(and much else besides), how could it be adapted to provide affordable options to low income groups?

Or how could it be used to precisely target information about transport options that work best given the nature of a person's particular disabilities?

And in relation to this to what extent could MaaS dovetail with the concept of Total Transport to also incorporate currently silo-ed provision of social services, education and non emergency patient transport services to provide a more efficient service overall?

How MaaS evolves may also vary between the very largest city regions in the world and the rest. The world cities are those where the impacts of the big tech 'platforms' are being most widely felt. The world cities also have the most clout and resources to assert themselves if they so wish. At a time when housing costs are already the number one public concern in many of these cities Airbnb is turning precious private and public housing stock into quasi-legal flop houses and pouring more petrol onto the flames of extreme financialisation

"It could be a system that steers people towards greater use of cars or away from them"

of housing in the process. Meanwhile, on transport there is evidence that Uber and equivalents can eat into mass transit use (particularly in the US). And now there is the potential (depending on how MaaS develops) for Californian corporations to usurp the city's role as trusted and impartial provider of transport information and access in the process, they are potentially also extending their control into cities' transport planning role. In short, the world cities have some big decisions to make about the big tech platforms.

In the UK the role that second tier city regions play on MaaS may also be a product of their different circumstances and aspirations as they may well be hemmed in by their, as yet, limited influence over the core of any MaaS

offer - public transport. This role could also be hampered by the hollowing out of local government by recent national administrations which means the resources that even some of the larger city regions have at their disposal to engage with issues like MaaS are highly constrained. However we still suggest 'five tests for good MaaS' in our report that could be a useful frame for any urban area to think about MaaS (see panel opposite).

Whether we are on the verge of a MaaS movement, or experiencing MaaS delusion, is not yet clear. But what is clear is that city regions will have a key role to play in determining whether MaaS is fool's gold or the real thing. ◼

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
▶ Jonathan Bray is the director of the Urban Transport Group. Throughout his career in policy and lobbying roles he has been at the frontline in bringing about more effective, sustainable and equitable transport policies.