

Life after lockdown: briefing paper 1

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This is the first of a series of Sustrans briefing papers exploring how the Covid-19 pandemic is affecting people in relation to transport and movement, and neighbourhoods and places. We will seek to offer solutions in response to the crisis that help better prepare us for life after lockdown and a 'new normal' that supports healthier places, and improves the lives of people.

Author: Tim Burns, Sustrans

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We connect people and places, create liveable neighbourhoods, transform the school run and deliver a happier, healthier commute. Join us on our journey. [www.sustrans.org.uk](http://www.sustrans.org.uk)

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# Introduction

On 23 March, as a result of the global Covid-19 pandemic, the UK was plunged into lockdown. Staying home and social distancing became the priority of governments and people across the UK. Overnight, public transport became something to avoid wherever possible.

Public transport helps to reduce congestion, greenhouse gases, and connect people and communities across the UK. It is a vital lifeline for the millions of people living in the UK who do not own a car<sup>1</sup>.

Buses, trams and trains provide these benefits because they bring people together onto the same vehicle to achieve efficiencies that benefit society and the environment and ensure services are financially sustainable. But bringing people together in close proximity is no longer desirable, and this doesn't look likely to change anytime soon.

At Sustrans, our mission is to make it easier to walk and cycle. Whilst the UK hasn't acted as quickly as other nations, we are beginning to witness a UK-wide effort to improve conditions for walking and cycling that is unprecedented in its urgency as we begin to transition out of lockdown. This effort to redesign our cities and towns is critical as public transport capacity is reduced and people instead use other transport modes. Without more people walking and cycling or travelling less we are likely to see our cities grind to a halt due to an increase in private car use.

*The effort to redesign cities and towns to improve conditions for walking and cycling is unprecedented in its urgency*

As we transition from the first lockdown into a 'new normal' we need to find solutions to manage the Covid-19 pandemic whilst simultaneously facing up to the big issues facing our country long before anyone had even heard of Covid-19: the climate crisis, air pollution, poor health, and social inequality. All are associated with private car use and, in the longer term, we will have achieved nothing if people simply move from buses to bikes.

In this paper we make four recommendations for policymakers and governments across the UK:

- Do not give up on public transport
- Reallocate road space for walking and cycling
- Fast-track other measures to increase walking and cycling
- Encourage people to work from home, and live locally

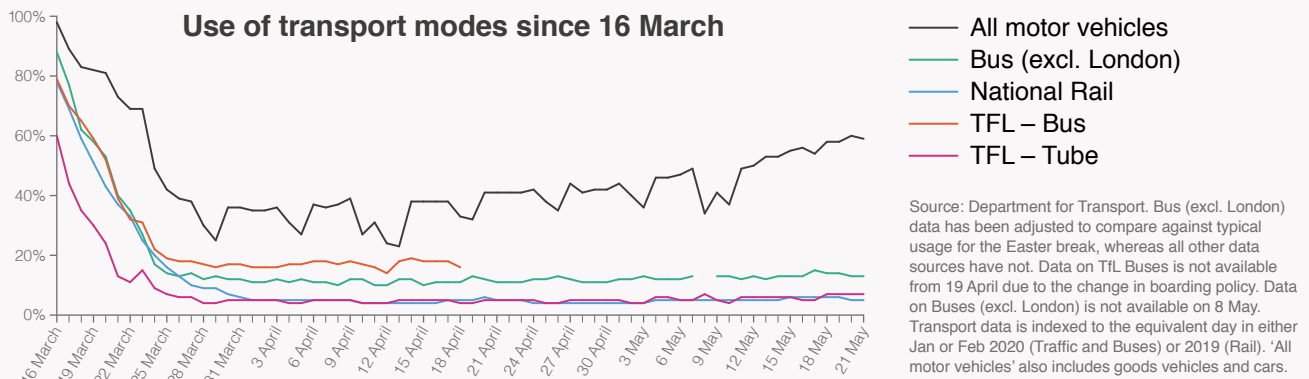
We know, for most people, the way we used to live our lives is currently not an option. What we don't know is what the future will look like. Alongside the many challenges facing decision makers there are also opportunities arising from this crisis, one of which is redesigning how we travel to benefit everyone. We know that transport will never be the same, it must be better.

# The impact of lockdown on transport

To enable social-distancing across the UK, a lockdown was introduced on 23 March. The nation was told to stay at home and only essential journeys were allowed. The effect of lockdown on travel is unprecedented. Private motor vehicle use reduced by up to 75%, bus use (excluding London) fell by up to 90%, and national rail patronage by 96%.<sup>2</sup>

From 11 May lockdown began to be eased (although with differences across the four nations of the UK). In England more people have been encouraged back to work and there are relaxations in how often, and for some nations, where people can exercise.

Subsequently, private motor vehicle use has been steadily rising – reaching 59% of levels considered to be normal by the 21 May.<sup>3</sup> Bus use, however, was 87% down on normal levels on the 21 May, and passenger numbers on national rail remain down by 95% with the tube in London down by 93%. National data for walking and cycling is unavailable although city data suggests in many places cycling has increased – especially for recreation.



The message is clear; whilst public transport has declined and usage continues to be a fraction of pre-lockdown, motor vehicle use, including car use, is rising rapidly as we see the initial phase in lockdown being lifted.

The UK Government's recovery plan is seeking to further relax lockdown measures over June and July if tests are met, including advising schools in England to begin reopening to more pupils from the beginning of June.

We therefore expect increases in driving to continue as the UK reopens for business with much smaller increases in public transport observed. A recent survey found 56% of UK driving licence holders who currently do not own a vehicle said Covid-19 has made them consider purchasing a car when it's safe to do.<sup>4</sup>

## So what are the likely impacts of transport trends in the UK over the next six months?

The UK Government has suggested that in order to maintain social distancing on public transport, capacity will be reduced by up to 90%.<sup>5</sup> Therefore as people return to work, school, and generally travel more, vast numbers of people who used to travel by public transport will have to either travel less or seek alternative modes, including walking, driving and cycling.

Whilst on average each year people make far more trips by private vehicles (891 journeys) than public transport modes (93 journeys), there were still 8.3 billion passenger journeys made by public transport in 2018-19 in Great Britain.<sup>6</sup> Public transport use is also much higher by specific demographic groups, for example young adults, people over the age of 65 and people from minority ethnic groups.

*8.3 billion passenger journeys were made by public transport in 2018-19 in Britain*

Public transport use is also much higher in many urban areas, especially our larger cities and towns. In London, public transport accounted for 36% of trips in 2018.<sup>7</sup> In Edinburgh 30% of residents use a bus every single day.<sup>8</sup> And in the West Midlands, public transport modal share of journeys to urban centres was approximately 37% in 2016 (although these figures do not include walking and cycling).<sup>9</sup>

We are therefore likely to see previously unimaginable changes to travel and transport. anywhere in the UK with high public transport use. And in smaller towns and villages there is increased risk cuts to more rural bus services which could contribute transport poverty and rural inequality. As people switch from public transport to the car the number of journeys by private cars could be even greater than before the Covid-19 crisis. This will lead to significant congestion and gridlock in urban areas, whilst increasing greenhouse gas emissions, air pollution and other health issues and put many people off walking and cycling.

Cities and towns must do everything they can to avoid gridlock and ensure people do not drive more. This means taking action to better prioritise modes of travel that are more efficient than private car use and still allow for social distancing – walking and cycling. Getting as many people as possible to walk or cycle who can, frees up road space for those that cannot and benefits everyone.

*Cities and towns must do everything they can to avoid gridlock and ensure people do not drive more*

In response, many cities and towns are developing plans and beginning to implement changes on the ground to reallocate road space for walking and cycling both to ensure social distancing can take place, and make walking and cycling a more attractive option for essential journeys.

There is another huge challenge currently facing the public transport sector – funding. How long will governments underpin financing of public transport if capacity is reduced by as much as 90%? And even if public transport capacity can be increased through social distancing measures, will people be willing to travel by public transport?

A recent survey found that of the people who hadn't used public transport over the past seven days, 36% will not use public transport for any reason until they feel safe.<sup>10</sup> Messaging from the government and cities to avoid public transport unless you have to use it, is likely to further associate public transport as being an unsafe activity in the mind-set of the public in the long-term.

## What needs to happen?

### Do not give up on public transport

Crucially we should not give up on public transport. If increased testing and tracing programmes are implemented and successful, they are likely to support a rise in public transport capacity over time. Most importantly, if a vaccine can be developed, public transport capacity could feasibly return to similar levels as seen before the crisis, or increase if provision is improved.

Public transport is critical to many people who cannot afford a car and have no other transport options, many of whom are key workers. We need to continue to subsidise public transport and ensure services and capacity are increased wherever possible, for example more frequent services, and the greater use of bus gates to speed up services by reducing access for private motor vehicles. Finally we must ensure that the public trust public transport in the future. We need to ensure public messaging balances immediate and long term needs, alongside rigorous cleaning and social distancing measures in place.

*We need to continue to subsidise public transport and ensure capacity is increased*

### Reallocate road space for walking and cycling

The UK has been in the midst of a walking and cycling revolution. Cycle manufacturers and shops across the UK have reported a boom in demand, and many expect a further increase in sales as people consider resuming journeys to work when restrictions ease.<sup>11</sup> Many places have seen a 70% rise in the number of people cycling<sup>12</sup>, and Scotland recently announced walking and cycling levels are 30% and 50% higher, respectively for the nation.<sup>13</sup>

In response, it is positive to see the increased ambition and support at all levels of UK governance towards walking and cycling. A £250m emergency active travel fund in England<sup>14</sup> alongside £10m in Scotland<sup>15</sup> and similar support being developed in Wales and Northern Ireland, will help cities and towns fast-track schemes, including widening footways, installing cycle tracks, pedestrianising streets, and reducing through traffic.

Many cities have already released plans and some have even started to change street layouts, however completed schemes are currently still a rarity and many cities and towns have not yet announced plans. Furthermore, at the time of writing, we are still awaiting details of how the £250m emergency fund will be allocated across England and if similar funding will be announced in Wales and Northern Ireland.

We are already behind where we need to be for roadspace reallocation to be successful. And as the number of people driving begins to rise again we need to commence delivery of this work as soon as possible otherwise we might miss the opportunity altogether.

We also need to ensure what is built has an opportunity to be made permanent. As far as possible schemes should form part of longer term plans to improve walking and cycling. These are more likely to have existing political support and be made permanent. No one wants to see funding spent on projects that do not exist in two years' time.

*We need to ensure what is built has an opportunity to be made permanent*

## Fast-track other measures to increase walking and cycling

It is of course not just about roadspace reallocation, we need to do much more if we are to see increases in walking and cycling. For example, Northern Ireland took steps last week to allow electric cycles to be used on the road without the need for registration, licensing or insurance. We need to:

- make it illegal to park on the pavement anywhere in the UK
- make 20mph the default speed in all urban and residential areas
- consider removing VAT from cycle sales to increase access to cycles for all people, including e-bikes and adapted cycles
- give all councils the power to enforce moving traffic offences, including enforcement of school streets.
- increase cycle parking
- develop 'park and cycle' facilities at existing park and ride hubs
- offer free servicing in cycle shops
- declutter pavements
- reduce waiting times at pedestrian crossings

## Encourage people to work from home, and live locally

Even the most ambitious plans for walking and cycling from cities across the UK are unlikely to meet the needs of all people who formerly took public transport. Many people and organisations have learnt through lockdown that working from home is possible and in many ways beneficial. Encouraging people to continue to work from home will be essential wherever possible.

*Encouraging people to stay local can reduce unnecessary car journeys*

Staggering shift patterns during the day, and rotating shifts during which people can come into the office will also be important, both for transport networks and for social distancing within the workplace.

Retaining governmental guidelines that encourage people to stay local – for example exercising locally and using local shops and services will also support walking and cycling and reduce often unnecessary car journeys.

## How do we make future transport better than it is today?

Living amid Covid-19 offers huge challenges to transport planners across the country to keep places moving, sustainably. However Covid-19 also offers an opportunity to experiment and redesign travel that would otherwise never exist. Some of the best ideas that exist today have been born directly out of a crisis, for example the NHS, which has been serving the UK for over 70 years and is now essential in the UK's response to Covid-19.

*Some of the best ideas that exist today have been born directly out of a crisis*

Covid-19 is unprecedented. No one can predict how the next 12 months will pan out and what the impact will be for our lives, the economy and the environment, including transport.

Will we see a big shift away from public to private transport? Or will we find ways to maintain social distancing on buses and trains to increase capacity, that people trust will keep them safe? And can this be achieved without increasing the cost to passengers, especially those on lower incomes, or who currently receive free or discounted travel?

Will people move away from shared transport models, for example car clubs and bike share schemes? Will sharing e-scooters and future models of shared and autonomous car use be dead in the water before they start? Will car dependency be further locked into our lives forever?

Or will people continue to live more locally, as many have been over the past two months? Will people work from home more, video-conference more, and take fewer longer journeys to other parts of the country? Could we all live in '20 minute neighbourhoods' where most everyday services and needs are within an easy walking distance from our homes?

If we continue to see current trends towards increased private transport what does a solution look like that simultaneously responds to the existing challenges we face, including the climate crisis, air pollution, and a health crisis fuelled by inequality? And how will we seek to rebuild our economy from what is likely to be the largest recession since the Great Depression in the 1930s?<sup>16</sup>

Transport will never be the same. We don't have all of the answers but we have a window to rethink it. Our goal as government, as a sector, as people taking essential journeys must be to make transport better – safer, more inclusive, more sustainable and more resilient.

*We don't have all of the answers but we have a window to rethink*



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