

Life after lockdown: briefing paper 1

Transport in the UK will never be the same again, it must be better

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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.

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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 car¹.

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.

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.

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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%.²

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.³ Bus

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 20% for some time. Therefore as people return to work, school, and generally travel more and more, the UK will see a significant increase in demand for private 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.¹⁰ 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.

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

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.

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.

Staggering shift patterns during the day, and rotating shifts during which

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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.

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.

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