

OPINION Covid must not be excuse for backsliding

Pre-pandemic, the Government was promising ‘bold and ambitious action’ to address transport climate issues. The goals can still be achieved, but the challenge is vast, says **Darren Shirley**

Before Covid-19, the Government had begun to set out an agenda that would have seen our transport system transformed. Greater levels of sustainable transport would have been achieved through increased active travel and public transport combined with a move to zero emission vehicles.

Just weeks before the lockdown, the need to reduce carbon emissions to net zero and bring air pollution within legal limits led Transport Secretary Grant Shapps to promise “bold and ambitious action” to ensure that “public transport and active travel will be the natural first choice for our daily activities”.

A mere four months have passed since Shapps made those statements, but transport has undergone a seismic change which no one could have predicted.

As the UK begins the process of recovery, the need for sustainable transport has only strengthened, but now the question is how do we ensure that those promises are not forgotten in these uncertain times and in the rush to get the economy back on its feet? Campaign for Better Transport’s latest report, *Covid-19 Recovery: Renewing the Transport System*, examines the scale of the challenge ahead and makes the case for a green, transport-led recovery post-Covid.

The ongoing effect of the pandemic on the transport network is unprecedented, putting the very viability of public transport at risk. In the short term, reduced passenger numbers

have had profound financial implications for public transport operators, and the continued need for social distancing will impact on fare revenue for the foreseeable future.

Despite Transport for London (TfL) services being back up to 94% of pre-Covid levels, passenger numbers are still only about a fifth of what they were a year ago.

On the national rail network, where passengers were told to “consider all other forms of transport before using public transport”, numbers are languishing around 15% of normal. In the longer term, passenger demand could be affected by increased home working, public mistrust in the safety of public transport and the expected economic downturn. But the long-term economic and social costs of permanently diminishing the public transport system will be much greater than the short-term costs of renewing the sector.

While passenger numbers on public transport remain low, car traffic on the other hand is back to between 80% and 95% of pre-pandemic levels. If public transport remains a ‘last resort’ for journeys we could even see car traffic surpassing pre-lockdown levels.

One of the upsides of the lockdown was the increase in walking and cycling, but it’s hard to see active travel remaining an attractive option for many as traffic returns to our streets and winter beckons.

The challenge, then, is vast; but so too is the opportunity. Transport policy will have to adapt to ensure social, environmental and



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economic benefits are secured following the pandemic.

An economic renewal should put in place a transport system that delivers against these objectives. We need a transport system that facilitates economic growth and supports access to education, training and employment as well as supporting commuting and leisure travel and providing value for money from public funding.

We need to improve access to essential public services and social and leisure activities to tackle social exclusion and isolation, with equal access to travel by different demographic groups and between regions.

Finally, we need to clean up private and public transport vehicles in line with net-zero carbon goals, legal limits on air pollutions

and reducing wider environmental impacts. Our legal (and moral) obligation to achieve net zero carbon emissions and reduce air pollution has not diminished during the pandemic, and the Government must not allow any backsliding here.

As the report makes clear, if the Government addresses these challenges as part of a green, transport-led recovery programme, we can emerge from this current crisis with a world-leading public transport system and improved connectivity; 100% zero-emission road transport and railway; permanent improvements to sustain greater levels of walking and cycling; and changes to the way transport is paid for, including new means to raise revenue.

WHAT’S NEEDED NOW

Of course the question is how can this be achieved? The *Renewing the Transport System* report calls on the Government to:

- Require local transport authorities to produce plans to permanently reshape local transport networks based on active travel, shared and public transport with

future Government capital and revenue funding linked to these plans. Ensure local authorities and bus operators work together to re-plan bus provision, with better integrated, multi-modal networks. Tendered and franchised services are likely to play more of a role.

- Not return to the previous franchises on the railway and place a greater focus on leisure as well as commuter travel and new industry structures with devolution of control to city regions.

- Accelerate the shift to 100% zero emission road and rail travel by requiring all buses to be zero emission, supporting the growth of a hydrogen-fuelled heavy fleet sector in the UK, incentivise the shift to electric vans for deliveries and fleet, and initiate a rolling programme of rail electrification.

- Lock in the shift to active travel with permanent infrastructure changes and ensure it does not restrict public transport and bus services. E-scooters should be legalised for use on the road and cycle lanes with a procurement framework for hire schemes set up and powers for

local authorities to issue permits for hire operators.

- Prioritise infrastructure to support sustainable transport, such as rail reopenings, bus priority and digital systems.
- Establish new sources of raising revenue such as workplace parking levies and road use charges to support the shift to sustainable transport.

Government support has been invaluable in sustaining the transport sector through the crisis so far. But now the Government must increase its ambition and accelerate the delivery of planned improvements to ensure that transport better serves communities across the country.

As the long road to recovery begins, a future-focused strategy is essential for the transport system to survive and communities to retain connectivity. By supporting public transport, walking and cycling, the Government can not only improve our environment and our health, but also create jobs, tackle social exclusion and help the economy to recover.

READ ONLINE
Read Covid-19 Recovery: Renewing the transport system