

OPINION

Funding the future of greener travel

An effective public transport system will play an important role in a healthy, sustainable future. But the Government needs to act to ensure that the Covid recovery is not car-led, says **Paul Tuohy**

The effect of Covid-19 on public transport has been seismic. Rail journeys are at their lowest since the mid-19th century and bus use is teetering at just more than half of pre-lockdown levels. But we also know that buses, trams and trains will have a vital role to play in a green recovery and a fair, healthy, sustainable future.

With the Government due to publish its spending plans this month, the money it sets aside for transport and transport infrastructure will shape not just transport provision, but have implications for our environment and our health, the wellbeing of our communities and the future of our economy for years to come.

The Government has already announced the end of the rail franchise system, but we are yet to find out what will replace it in the long-term. The Government should use the opportunity Covid-19 has provided to design new contractual arrangements for

the railway, adopting a much more flexible outcome-based approach that takes into account the likely long-term consequences of less commuting.

Reforms should create a railway that is passenger-centred and affordable to use, with competition in the right places and better integration with other forms of public transport. We also need much more devolution to local and regional bodies so they can develop and provide the right services for their areas.

We know that improving rail connectivity is a priority for many – a YouGov survey we commissioned found the ability to physically get to a rail station is a significant concern in the East Midlands (23%), South-West (22%) and West Midlands (21%).

To improve connectivity where it is most needed, and be most beneficial, the Government should set aside between £4.74 billion and £6.37bn for delivering a rail reopening programme, with £1.82bn

23%

concerned about getting to a train station in the East Midlands

of this fund invested in the next five years to deliver schemes and a further £1bn for fast-tracking development of future schemes. This could deliver 33 reopened lines with 72 new stations and 343 miles of reinstated passenger services.

Unlike rail, which had seen passenger numbers increase in the past decade, bus use has been in decline. The Government has recognised this and committed to a National Bus Strategy to address the decline. Now we need the right fiscal measures to ensure its delivery.

To improve bus services, local authorities need to work collaboratively with commercial operators to replan bus provision, with better integrated, multi-modal networks offering high-quality services.

The Government should prioritise a programme of investment in physical and digital infrastructure to support local transport. This should include a new generation of modal interchanges

connecting bus networks with rail and other forms of transport for first- and last-mile journeys and targeted investment to make motorways and other strategic roads more bus-friendly. It should also provide capital funding for local bus infrastructure to encourage investment by local authorities in bus lanes, urban traffic control, priority at



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Tuohy joined Campaign for Better Transport as chief executive in November having worked for six years transforming the former Cyclists' Touring Club into Cycling UK, where he instituted the 'Big Bike Revival'.

He was also instrumental in creating the Walking and Cycling Alliance with like-minded organisations that convinced Government to commit over £2 billion towards more walking and cycling infrastructure and education programmes. Prior to Cycling UK, Paul worked with YMCA and RNIB and was the CEO of Missing People.

As part of its green recovery programme to support job creation, stimulate the economy and reduce pollution, the Government should rapidly accelerate the transition of road and rail transport to zero emission

lights, bus waiting facilities, interchanges and bus stations.

We know that investing in sustainable transport brings a myriad of benefits, but analysis for the TUC found that investing in cycle lanes and pedestrianisation projects brings by far the most economic and social benefits (investment in rail and bus upgrades and network expansion, and in electric vehicle – EV – batteries and charge points, also produces a high return). The same analysis found that road building had much lower associated economic or social benefits when compared with sustainable transport options. To maximise the return on its investment, the Government should prioritise active travel, bus, rail and electric vehicle capital infrastructure in the second Road Investment Strategy (RIS2).

With UK bus and rail fares higher than in many European cities, the Government should support a rapid move to simplified

or congestion charges) on local roads and workplace parking levies, so the income from these schemes can be used to fund maintenance and renewals of the local road network and for investment in public transport to encourage modal shift.

To further increase modal shift, mobility credits for use on public transport, buying or hiring bikes or micromobility vehicles, car clubs and other shared mobility options should be widely available. These incentives should be available at key life moments, such as moving home or starting a new job.

As part of its green recovery programme to support job creation, stimulate the economy and reduce pollution, the Government should rapidly accelerate the transition of road and rail transport to zero emission.

This can be done by first facilitating supply, then stimulating demand through regulation, taxation and incentives. There should be incentives for businesses, such as lower upfront cost of EVs; a link between VED rates and carbon emissions; ongoing support for plug-in vehicle and charge point grants; and grants for local authorities to invest in charging hubs and on-street schemes.

Hydrogen fuel provides a viable zero emission option for fleets that are too heavy or require longer ranges than electric batteries can provide. The UK has a significant capacity for the production of both green hydrogen and hydrogen-fuelled vehicles, and the Government should recognise and support this through sector-specific manufacturing deals. The Government should also introduce a bus fleet and depot overhaul programme so all new buses are zero emission from 2025, and the full fleet is zero emission by 2035.

A deal between the Government and manufacturers would deliver this transformation and ensure the viability and growth of bus manufacturing by boosting UK supply chains and reducing reliance on overseas technology and suppliers.

A rolling programme of rail electrification would further the rail sector's advantage as a green mode of transport. The Government should support the introduction of zero emission technology, such as hydrogen fuel cell trains, to stimulate the market for alternatives to diesel trains and make the UK a leading manufacturer, with the aim of replacing all diesel trains by 2040.

Covid-19 has caused major upheaval to our transport system and has changed the way we travel, perhaps forever. But, as we try to make sense of the situation, we must not lose sight of a future post-Covid and what that transport system should look like. Public transport needs Government support now, more than ever, to protect and renew it for the future and prevent a car-led recovery.