



The graph of doom tells us we have to do things not just a bit differently, but significantly differently

OPINION

A time for hope?

It has taken a global pandemic to teach us what can be achieved when we are forced to reassess our lives. Let's hope the lessons are not quickly forgotten, says **Richard Dilks**

We are in the midst of a gigantic socio-economic experiment as we respond to the Covid-19 pandemic.

This has been particularly obvious in transport, with pictures of our empty streets, stations and airports speaking volumes.

A global pandemic is, of course, totally unwelcome, but that does not mean we cannot draw some useful lessons from it for when we emerge from this public health crisis to the one we really should have been laser-focused on for years: climate change.

We are doing badly on greenhouse gas emissions in the transport sector in the UK, unlike other economic sectors. The Department for Transport (DfT) has recently published its very welcome draft transport decarbonisation document.

This includes what someone rightly

described to me as "the graph of doom", which shows just how far off the legally binding target of net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 we are as a nation.

And yet, we have so many promising ingredients. That plan itself is very much a step in the right direction from Government, with a foreword from the Secretary of State saying that 'public transport and active travel will be the natural first choice for our daily activities'.

That is absolutely the right direction of travel, although being the chief executive of the national collective body for shared transport such as bike share and car club schemes allows me to get out my yellow highlighter and add 'shared transport' into Mr Shapps' list.

We also have a willingness and ability to build and adopt new technologies (take

online retail sales versus other European countries as one example); a shared transport fleet and user base at an all-time high; the highest levels of devolution and funding to our nations and regions in living memory; huge potential and some serious policy attention and infrastructure work on walking and cycling; record levels of investment into public transport and a



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Government paying attention to relatively new mobility options such as e-scooters and flexible bus services. We have an innovative industrial base and a world-class higher education sector.

FUTURE TRANSPORT ZONES

The Government has also recently announced three Future Transport Zones (see page 28), which have great potential to coalesce transport and technology into action on the ground that can pave the way for future welcome and much needed steps.

By future, don't think 'futuristic'; rather these are things that are current in other places but that we should have here, such as mobility hubs, intelligent use of drones, pan-modal booking platforms and e-cargo bikes.

Mobility hubs have particularly significant potential in my view. They are where shared, public and active transport come together physically (and ideally digitally too, for example via a journey planning or booking app) alongside improved public realm.

In public transport, the penny dropped about bringing different public transport modes some years back (albeit this is still work in progress). Now we need to get that proverbial bit of currency falling across sustainable transport. The graph of doom tells us we have to do things not just a bit differently, but significantly differently.

We do not live in a dictatorship where we are told when and where we can go (or to be more accurate, we do not live in those conditions the vast majority of the time) and so, once the pandemic restrictions ease, we are going to be back in the game of persuading people to do the right thing in greenhouse gas terms. Mobility hubs can help, for three big reasons.

First is that they bring supply options together in one, highly visible place. Supply options across transport – shared bikes, owned bikes, shared cars, walking routes, rail, bus, electric charging facilities are all examples. But also supply options across community needs. These hubs are where the community pharmacy could go, where the health visitor could see clients, where the youth club could have facilities or the post office could operate.

Second is that they bring demand together in that one place. This can be a challenge for shared transport and for flexible bus services that can point people towards private car use, which so often starts from near where you are or very close to it.

Third is that they can be engines of change by what they strip out as well as what they add in. So, it is not just about private car parking at the hub, but in the surrounding area too. Residential or commercial developments, airports, hospital sites (and the list continues) can all be built at greater density with mobility

hubs than without them and, if designed well, they can be much nicer places too.

You can read more in our introductory guidance on mobility hubs. All of this is not to claim that they could work everywhere, but the list of potential sites is long and they can be an important step in the right direction on the path we need to take as a country as we emerge from Covid-19.

Another of those steps is to encourage and make the most of the potential of shared transport generally given its proven ability to cut carbon emissions and congestion while boosting the use of public and active transport. You can sign a pledge on our website to do just that in your area, development or operations, whether you are, for example, an authority that has declared a climate emergency or a company measuring itself on greenhouse gas emissions.

TO SUM UP

I live in London. As I type, I can hear the birdsong and smell the notably sweeter air drifting in through the open window. The planes do not drone overhead. The street has become a de facto playspace for the children who live on it. People have dug bikes out of sheds and are on them every day. We do not need to lose all this as our public health crisis eases; indeed if we are to avoid ever more damaging climate change, we must not.