

# Wiping away post-pandemic uncertainties

**Stephen Joseph** says many matters still need to be resolved, but 'some of the directions of travel for transport are becoming clearer'



## ABOUT THE CHAIRMAN

**Stephen Joseph** is the Chairman of the *Smart Transport* Editorial Board and was chief executive of the Campaign for Better Transport for 30 years before taking up a position as advisor to the charity last summer. He has also been a member of various government advisory groups and was awarded an OBE in 1996 for services to transport.

**W**ith the world and the people in it still dominated by Covid-19, its impact remains the biggest issue for those involved in transport and mobility. Much of this is about the uncertainties the virus has generated. Will people want to use public transport in the future? Will people be working from home all or some of the time, and what does that mean for offices and the businesses who support them and, indeed, the places they are sited in?

There are now lots of surveys of travel behaviour and public attitudes to travel and commuting. On public transport, the evidence is clear – many of those with any choice are cautious about using it, especially on longer commutes to the bigger cities. Passengers are slowly coming back to buses in the smaller towns, but rail use is still well down and travel into bigger cities as a whole is still low.

Scottish Government has radical plans to decarbonise all rail networks by the year

# 2035

In part this is because some types of travel demand are down. Schools are not reopening until September, so those with school-age children have remained at home for the moment. Employers are not, in the main, pushing people back to work in offices, so those in the shops and service companies dependent on those offices are also working less.

Then there are longer term effects – online shopping during lockdown has led to closure of shops and stores – out of town as well as on the high street. And, as has been widely noted, the growth of Zoom etc. has led many firms to discover they don't need so much office space, anyway, and that business travel is overrated.

Quite where these are going to end up is very unclear – I've been detecting a weariness with constant Zoom and Teams calls and a desire for people to meet up with workmates and restart the innovation and connection that only comes from talking to someone in person.

This is amplified for those with school-age or pre-school children at home and the difficulty of balancing their demands and their home-schooling with work.

So, it may be that when schools reopen many more will venture back to workplaces. But it is clearer than ever that for many the five day/week commute is not coming back – more flexibility, with home/

remote working combined with some in-person meetings to remake connections and reawaken team spirits, seems likely to be, in the already hackneyed phrase, the "new normal".

All this will have profound implications for transport. There are some signs of people staying more local, which may mean that local hubs for mobility and workspaces, as championed by CoMoUK and increasingly by sub-national bodies like England's Economic Heartland and Midlands Connect, may come into their own, as set out in this issue (see page 56).

Alongside this, the Government appears determined to shape as well as respond to the emerging trends.

In my previous introductory article, I referred to the Transport Decarbonisation plan and the radical objectives within it, and the summer has seen a series of workshops exploring the plan's themes. On top of that, we have now had 'Gear Change: a bold vision for cycling and walking', complete with a foreword by the Prime Minister.

This is a truly radical document. It includes, in the PM's words, money for "first hundreds, then thousands of miles of protected bike lanes, so anyone can ride safely; low-traffic neighbourhoods, to stop rat-running and make it easier to walk and cycle; bus and bike corridors on some main roads; and funding

for a massive rise in e-bikes, all of which will open up cycling to more and different people and make places better for everyone". There will be vouchers to pay for bike maintenance, free cycling training for everyone who wants it, and parking changes to discourage the school run, he adds.

He also throws down a gauntlet to opponents, many of them in his own party. Referring back to his time as Mayor of London, he notes that he faced opposition but "when the results of consultations and opinion polls came back, our opponents were often surprised to find themselves in a small minority. People want the radical change we are committing to in this strategy, and we politicians shouldn't be afraid to give it to them".

The strategy includes a new body, Active Travel England, which is likened to an Ofsted for transport "in raising standards and challenging failure".

This will manage the initial £2 billion budget for active travel and will oversee standards for active travel schemes, including, apparently, the power to remove funding from local authorities that don't meet the standards.

The new body will be a statutory consultee in the planning system, and the document is critical of new developments that have ignored active and sustainable travel or even made it worse.

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Alongside this, there are other radical moves – councils will be given powers to enforce rules on moving traffic (a move all Governments since the 2004 Act that allowed it have shunned for fear of a media backlash).

Combined authorities will be given more control over their main roads. The Highway Code is being revised to give more priority to pedestrians and cyclists. New design guidelines have been published which aim to raise the standard for cycling infrastructure. Motorists who hit and kill cyclists and pedestrians face higher penalties

There is a whole section on freight, which shows signs of influence from the freight sub-committees that Smart Transport has hosted. Freight consolidation schemes

will be piloted, e-cargo bikes funded, and electric vans encouraged. There will be higher safety standards on trucks.

This is a very clear and radical policy, which sets a very clear direction for transport and with strong central control, but with more local powers too.

It will give more support to the Low Traffic Neighbourhoods and new spaces for walking and cycling now being implemented by many authorities as part of previous funding and guidance issued in May.

Similar policies and funding are being implemented in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but the English policy is far-reaching, the more interesting because it comes from a Conservative government.

There is, as yet, less clarity from the Government on the rest of transport.

Public transport is still operating on hand-to-mouth funding arrangements and its future is not yet clear. However, even here the Government appears to be ploughing ahead with new investments, including the first stage of Trans-Pennine rail upgrades.

The Scottish Government has announced a radical plan to decarbonise the whole Scottish rail network by 2035, electrifying most of it and putting hydrogen and battery trains on the rest. Funding for reopening and upgrading local rail lines has been announced.

What is missing at present is a strategy for local public transport and for longer distance travel. These need the same kind of long term planning and support that walking and cycling are now getting.

While commuting and business travel are still well down, leisure travel has returned, with higher car use at weekends than in the week. The uncertainties of international travel, with quarantines being lifted and re-imposed on travel to different countries, has led to more domestic UK breaks. Beaches and beauty spots are packed, traffic jams and unplanned car parking intrude on National Parks.

Maybe we need to turn attention to making leisure travel smarter – more traffic-free areas, e-bike hire, demand-responsive buses, pre-booked parking allocation, seamless mobility as a service (MaaS) offers to tourists. As we note on page 47, Cornwall is working towards something like this, and some National Parks are considering it too.

Of course, all of this may be completely blown off course by a resurgence of the virus this winter and renewed lockdowns in response. But, even with this threat, the some of the directions of travel for transport are becoming clearer.