

The way forward: Revitalising public transport use post-pandemic

May 2021



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The impact of the pandemic on transport use

Public transport is a necessity for accessing employment, education, leisure and vital services like healthcare, especially for people who do not own cars. But it is difficult to overstate how devastating the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has been on our public transport system. At the start of the first lockdown, people were advised - quite rightly - to stay at home and not use public transport unless absolutely necessary.

Although this advice was linked to the requirement to limit social contact altogether rather than any inherently higher risk of transmission on buses and trains, it has created a persistent fear in people of using them. Throughout the pandemic,

fortnightly surveys by Transport Focus showed that around a quarter of people who had not travelled by public transport recently pointed to feeling unsafe as the reason.¹

Even as restrictions were eased last summer, bus and rail use remained barely a fraction of pre-pandemic levels (around 60 per cent for buses and 30 per cent for rail), while motor vehicle traffic was back at pre-pandemic levels, despite many continuing to work from home. The effect was such that the RAC reported that 57 per cent of motorists believed having access to a car was more important than before the pandemic, and their willingness to drive less if public transport was improved was the lowest for decades.²

The problem with a car-led recovery

While the preference for private vehicles at the height of the pandemic was understandable, unless addressed it may normalise travelling by car in place of public transport and new habits

might prove difficult to shift. If the current trend continues, we risk a longer-term shift towards a car-based transport system. Greater motor vehicle use presents a number of challenges:

1. Health

- It increases physical inactivity, which is responsible for 1 in 6 deaths in the UK and costs the NHS nearly £1 billion a year³
- It is the main source of traffic-related air pollution, which is responsible for an equivalent of 36,000 deaths a year across the UK.⁴

2. Economic

- It leads to greater congestion on the roads, which costs the UK economy nearly £8 billion a year and harms the economic recovery.⁵

3. Environmental

- It reverses years of progress towards modal shift and stalls efforts to decarbonise transport

- It threatens our ability to achieve net zero targets. Driving in a medium-sized petrol car with one occupant produces more than four times as much greenhouse gas emissions per passenger kilometre as travelling by rail and almost twice as much as travelling by bus.⁶

4. Social

- It leaves people with no access to a private car - 24 per cent of all households in England, rising to 45 per cent in the lowest income bracket⁷ - isolated from family, friends, employment, leisure and other opportunities and more reliant on public transport.

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Rather than protect people from the virus, increased motor vehicle use actually exacerbates the risk of Covid-19 due to its negative impact on air quality:

- PM10 particulates air pollution has been found to increase the body's susceptibility to contracting Covid-19 by stimulating the release of a specific enzyme which the virus attacks⁸
- An international medical study linked air pollution to an increased risk of dying from Covid-19, with an estimated 14 per cent of UK deaths from Covid-19 attributed to long-term exposure to air pollution.⁹

This shows that getting back on public transport could actually help tackle the virus rather than being part of the problem. What is more, buses, trams and trains will have a vital role to play in a green recovery and a fair, healthy, sustainable future

But while the government is financially supporting public transport operators at the moment, this is likely to reduce over time. Yet, if low usage persists, operators may be forced to review and potentially cut services. This could leave many communities with no public transport services to return to after the pandemic.

Why people need to be assured about public transport

Bus and train operators have implemented a number of measures throughout the pandemic to ensure that people can travel with confidence. These include:

- Rigorous cleaning regimes
- Improved ventilation and air filtration
- Enforcement of compulsory mask wearing
- Maintaining regular services to enable social distancing measures.

Because of these measures and the relative lack of direct communication between passengers, there is much evidence that virus transmission is less likely on public transport compared to many other social settings:

- A study found low chances of catching Covid-19 in a train carriage, with a 0.32 per cent average rate of transmission for passengers sitting within three rows and five columns of an infected person¹⁰

- An August 2020 study found the risk of infection per average passenger journey on a half-full train, when a face covering is worn, to be one infection per 19,765 journeys¹¹
- Monthly sampling on the London Tube and bus network throughout the pandemic has so far found no traces of the virus.¹²

This is also evident in the high levels of confidence of people who have used buses and trains throughout the pandemic. According to the fortnightly surveys by Transport Focus, almost nine in ten people who have made journeys by train or bus felt safe doing so.¹³ This suggests that safety concerns are largely a perception of people who have not travelled by public transport - perhaps influenced by negative messaging - while those who have experienced it recently, tend to have a positive experience.



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People's travel needs post-pandemic

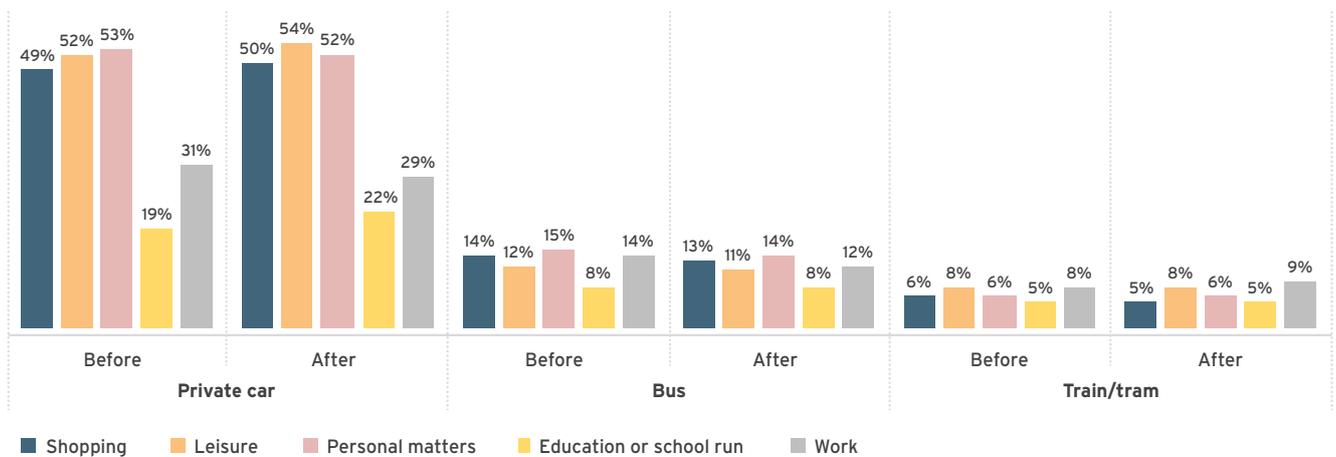
While we know travel overall and public transport use has been much reduced during the pandemic, uncertainty remains around how people's travel needs and habits will change once the restrictions on travel begin easing, compared to how they used to travel before the pandemic. To better understand this, we commissioned a public poll of over 2,000 people by Savanta ComRes.¹⁴

The survey found private cars were the main way of travelling before the Covid-19 pandemic and they are expected to remain the dominant form of transport when restrictions begin to ease, with approximately half of UK adults choosing driving for personal matters, leisure and shopping - a slight increase on their habits pre-pandemic. The proportion of people who expect to use the car for the school run or other education purposes has also increased from 19 per cent to 22 per cent post-pandemic. Conversely, there is a slight decrease in the proportion of people who expect to use buses or trains for different purposes (see Figure 1).

This largely resonates with Transport Focus findings that 60 per cent of those who used public transport regularly before March 2020 agree that they will use public transport as much, or more than they did previously when enough people have been vaccinated.¹⁵ This demonstrates that people would choose the best mode for the specific journey they are making. However, this choice is likely to be affected by the kinds of journeys people need to make in the future. Government messaging on the different permitted activities going forward, and ongoing vaccination rates, will play a large role.

Another factor is the recent increases of online shopping and remote working, which are expected to continue to some extent, meaning that people's overall need to make different journeys is likely to be reduced.

Figure 1: Use of private car, bus and train/tram, by trip purpose, before the pandemic and expected after restrictions begin to ease



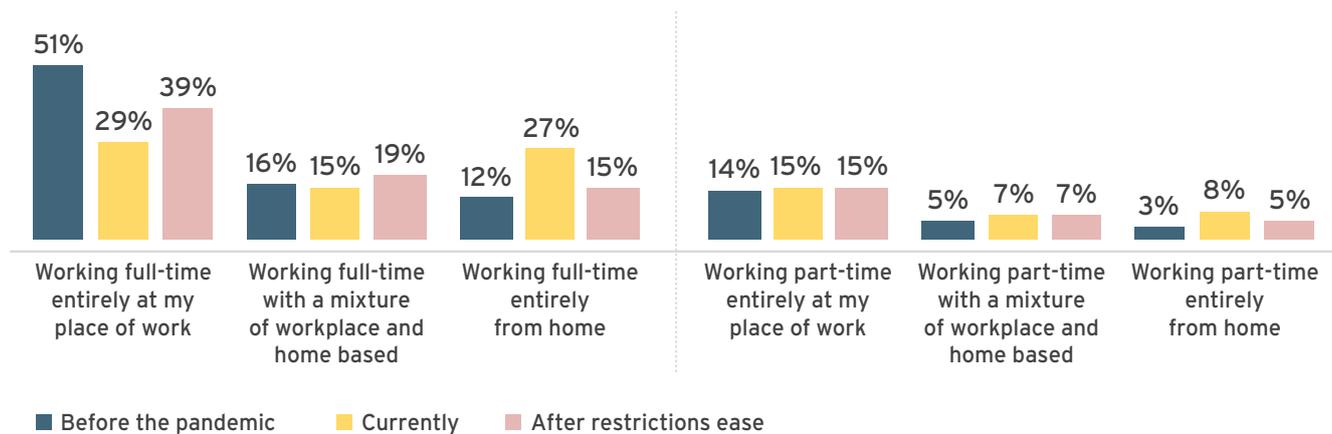
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According to our survey, a significant shift towards working from home can be expected compared to pre-pandemic. It found that, while half (51 per cent) of all those in employment were working full-time entirely from their place of work before the Covid-19 pandemic, just 39 per cent plan to do so

after Covid-19 restrictions begin to ease. On the other hand, the proportion who say they plan to work from home at least some of the time has risen from 35 per cent who did this before the Covid-19 pandemic to 47 per cent.

Figure 2: Workplace arrangements for people in work before, during and after the pandemic



Encouraging people back on to public transport

While the Government has been financially supporting public transport during the pandemic, this cannot continue at the present emergency levels. Instead, the Government should invest in measures to encourage passengers back on to public transport to ensure the transport system can survive and thrive post-pandemic. As the current restrictions begin to ease, the Government should change its messaging on the safety of public transport and review its position on social distancing.

Our survey also tested a number of measures which people say would encourage them to use public transport more (see chart below). In the short term, the Government should undertake a focused campaign to explicitly encourage people to return to buses and trains as the responsible choice to promote healthy and green ways to travel. As part of this, it should introduce targeted temporary promotion for passengers - a measure backed by 17 per cent of survey respondents. This could take the shape of a certain number of free journeys or 50 per cent off for a limited period of time¹⁶ to encourage people to try bus and rail travel again and hopefully feel reassured about its safety going forward.



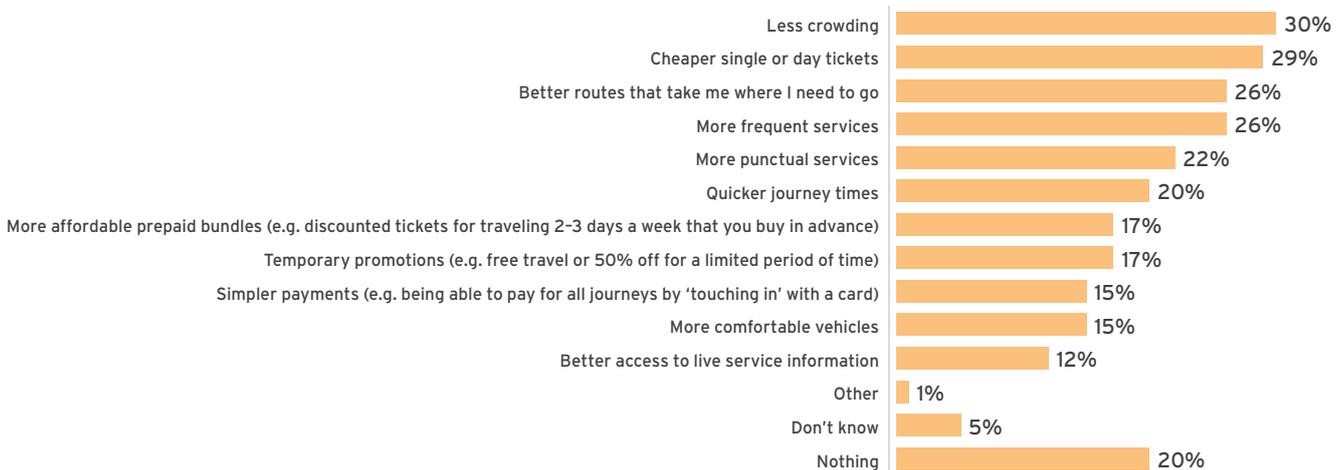
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While less crowding features as the most important factor among survey respondents, affordability is also a central concern for passengers. The survey found a total of 47 per cent of respondents who are in part-time or full-time employment expect they would work from home at least some of the time after Covid-19 restrictions begin to ease. While a similar proportion intend to travel to work by train as before the pandemic, lack of affordable fare options for part-time commuters might become a problem for people looking to return to the office.

A total of 29 per cent of respondents would like to see cheaper single or day tickets and 17 per cent would be encouraged back to public transport by more affordable prepaid bundles (e.g. discounted tickets for travelling two or three days a week that you buy in advance). Unless more flexible and affordable ticketing options are available for people wishing to travel part time, there is a danger that they will shift to making the journey by car or prefer to remain working from home entirely, thereby slowing down the economic recovery of town centres.

Figure 3: Measures which would encourage increased use of public transport



Other measures that would increase people's use of public transport include better routes (29 per cent), more frequent (26 per cent) and punctual (22 per cent) services, and quicker journey times (20 per cent). In addition to more affordable fares, the Government must also reform bus and train provision over the long term to ensure it is the convenient, reliable and affordable option that people want it to be to enable them to leave their cars behind.

Worryingly, however, the survey revealed that a fifth (20 per cent) of respondents said nothing would currently encourage them to increase their use of public transport, rising to 29 per cent among those aged 55 and over. This shows that the Government still has a long way to go in getting its messaging right and reversing the damage done during the pandemic to the perceived safety of public transport.



Our asks for government

We are asking the Government to place public transport at the heart of a green recovery from the pandemic. As matter of priority, the Government must ensure that public transport is seen as a safe way to travel and that service provision is maintained and safeguarded for

the future. It must also take a passenger-centred approach to getting people back on board to ensure that public transport provision evolves to suit new ways of working and living, offering a genuine alternative to the private car.

We call on the Government to:

1. Lead the way with a national campaign sending a visible message that public transport is a safe way to travel when appropriate measures, like wearing a face covering, are followed
2. Launch a targeted fare discount scheme for a limited period to encourage people to get back on board buses, trains and trams when they return to workplaces, shops, leisure and other destinations
3. Continue the emergency financial support for public transport services until such a time as it is no longer necessary to avoid a sudden cliff-edge shortage of funding
4. Protect existing services and enhance provision for communities that currently have no bus and rail networks by restoring lost rail links and long-term funding allocations for local buses
5. Accelerate implementation of contactless payments as standard, multi-operator ticketing across buses, price capping on trains and trams, and more affordable flexible ticket bundles that fit new travel patterns.

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