TRANSPORT RECOVERY

REBUILDING PUBLIC TRANSPORT PATRONAGE

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transform scotland

CREDITS

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FOREWORD

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Scotland's public transport industry has never before faced such a challenging time as during the Corona Crisis. Within a matter of days we moved from a position of encouraging everyone to use our services to one of actively discouraging all but essential journeys and implementing safety measures which, while necessary, seriously constrain our ability to operate normal services. As we now progress out of lockdown and back to normality, we're facing an uphill struggle to recover passenger numbers and customer confidence.

We could despair over the lost patronage and the halt that the pandemic has brought to our progress in moving towards cleaner, greener fleets – but instead I choose to feel a sense of hope. We have had a glimpse into a future when the roads are not jammed with cars, when congestion is a thing of the past and the air in our towns and cities is cleaner and healthier. More people are walking and wheeling and leaving their cars at home. At Xplore Dundee we have seen notable increases in journey times; those key workers who have been travelling on our buses for the past two months have enjoyed swift and congestion-free transport to their workplaces, better punctuality and the gift of extra time when they are not sitting in a queue of traffic or waiting at the bus stop. I want that for all of our customers, and for travellers across Scotland.

Our public transport network is key to the recovery of Scotland's economy, to social inclusion and to public health; we need to get people moving again to their workplaces, to shops and leisure activities and tourist destinations. Before the threat of a massive post-pandemic increase in private car usage becomes reality, now is the time for operators and authorities to think in a joined-up way about how public transport, alongside active travel modes, can continue to reduce emissions in our cities, and for the public to return to bus and rail so that we can lock in the benefits of reduced congestion and cleaner air.

This report highlights a golden opportunity borne of a global crisis, and it is one we may never have again. Let's be bold and ambitious and make the right decisions that will put Scotland at the forefront, with a sustainable transport system that moves people quickly, improves air quality and makes life better for all sections of society.

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PUBLIC TRANSPORT IN THE CORONA CRISIS

REBUILDING CONFIDENCE IN PUBLIC TRANSPORT

In the short- to medium-term there will naturally be a reluctance among the population to return to public transport and this might be noticed especially among the older generation where travel may not be essential. However, it should not be forgotten that it is thanks to our public transport networks that many key workers were able to continue to travel to and from their places of work during the lockdown; meanwhile, many Scottish households without access to a car continue to rely exclusively on public transport for journeys that are not accessible to them by active travel. To put this in context, some 30% of households in Scotland do not have access to a car and that figure is much higher in larger cities and particularly in the most deprived areas of Scotland.[1]

At the time of writing, we are in Phase 2 of the Scottish Government's recovery plan and while public transport patronage is still at low levels it is beginning to increase again.[2] During the recovery period there will be a vital role for governments to work with operators to support the networks and rebuild patronage. Operators will need to take all necessary steps to reassure their staff and passengers and the wider public of the safety of travelling through a combination of strict cleaning regimes, appropriate physical distancing, and encouraging users to wear face coverings.

The Scottish Government has reacted to the need to provide improved clarity on safety measures on public transport. In her statement in Parliament on Thursday 18 June, the First Minister announced that face-coverings would be made mandatory on public transport from the following Monday.[3] Further guidance on cleaning regimes and physical distancing may be required to rebuild confidence in public transport. For instance, to guarantee

sufficient physical distancing on the bus and tram networks, it may be necessary to temporarily limit concessionary passholders' travel to hours that avoid the morning and evening peaks. The Scottish Government must ensure that the rationale behind these measures is appropriate, clearly communicated, and that the wider risks across all transport modes are taken into account.

GETTING THE MESSAGE RIGHT

The need for physical distancing and messaging from governments urging their populations to avoid public transport unless essential has understandably created nervousness among the population about its future use. However, the apparent demonising of public transport from members of the UK Government has been deeply regrettable. The fact that this has been accompanied by messaging that it is acceptable for those with cars to drive some distance to exercise was certainly not in the spirit of 'We are all in this together' and was socially divisive – penalising those who cannot afford a car and those who have chosen not to own a car.

Fortunately we have not seen similar messaging from the Scottish Government. However, its approach has not been beyond criticism. For example, the initial creation of drive-through testing centres apparently without thought as to how those without cars would be able to access tests also highlighted a serious and alarming social justice issue and car-centric planning in the Scottish Government.

The First Minister's 18 June announcement that Scotland was moving into Phase 2 acknowledged that 'more people will use public transport'.[4] However, it did not clarify whether journeys beyond those that are essential are permitted and whether the guidance that allows people to travel beyond five miles to see friends and family will also apply to those who would do so by public transport. The Scottish Government must

ensure that its messaging on the use of public transport is clear and looks to rebuild confidence in this mode of transport. It must also ensure that as lockdown measures are lifted, households without access to a car will also regain their mobility by providing access to safe and reliable public transport.

UNDERSTANDING RISK

The need for physical distancing has had an understandable impact on public transport use and the narrative around this has created a negative perception in the minds of the public. However, Professor Hugh Pennington, emeritus professor of bacteriology at Aberdeen University is quoted as saying that evidence from China showed the virus spread more quickly in families than on public transport.[5] Meanwhile, studies in France (in May and June) and Austria (in April and May) that traced clusters of outbreaks found that none of the clusters could be traced back to public transport.[6]

Although this research is indicative of how the virus might spread, it does not provide conclusive evidence on the risk connected to using public transport. However, it is important that the risk of using public transport is considered alongside the broader risks associated with other modes – especially the car. Recent data shows that one is 20 times more likely to be killed when travelling by car than by train and hundreds of times more likely to be seriously injured. Similarly, travelling by bus is much safer than by car. In addition, the expansion of car use that is being predicted at the expense of public transport is likely to create other negative consequences to society at large through deterioration in local air quality, an increase in harmful climate emissions, congestion in our towns and cities, and a reduction in physical exercise where people opt for their car instead of a public transport commute that included active travel to or from the bus stop or train station.

It is not at all clear that government advice is currently considering this broader context

and this risks undermining government policy objectives on transport where sustainable modes sit at the top of the hierarchy (albeit that funding priorities have not matched these policy objectives).

A NEW NORMAL FOR TRANSPORT

The physical distancing that has been necessary to reduce the spread of the virus has impacted on areas of life well beyond public transport – other places where people gather such as pubs, restaurants, theatres, cinemas, sporting events and indeed workplaces have all had to close their doors. However, it remains the case that human beings are social animals who like to come together and mix in numbers for work and leisure. As those normal aspects of life return, public transport will have an essential role to play, ensuring that those without access to a car are not excluded from these activities, where active travel is not an option

Different travel patterns may emerge as more choose to work and meet remotely rather than continue to work a traditional five day week at the office. Operators and governments will need to respond to this 'new normal' and ensure that the public transport offering is seen to be attractive, convenient and easy to use.

One remarkable feature of the lockdown restrictions has been the dramatic improvements in local air quality from the much lower levels of road traffic and also the reduced accident rate. The reduced levels of traffic have encouraged many more people to walk and cycle and emergency measures taken by councils to create more space for active travel are to be heartily welcomed as is the government advice to exercise daily. However these benefits are rapidly diminishing as the roads once again become dangerous and car-dominated. Permanent measures must be put in place to encourage and promote active travel modes alongside a reliable and well-connected public transport network and change the mind-set of many motorists.

From a health perspective there is mounting evidence that those suffering from obesity and its associated diseases, and those who have been impacted by poor air quality and breathing difficulties, are far more likely to develop the most critical coronavirus symptoms. This is yet another reminder that the transport system that we provide is directly linked to our public health and going forward we need to see a joined-up approach. A return to previous levels of road traffic or indeed an increase on those levels will condemn yet more of the population to needless suffering and pose a long-term burden on the health service.

The Corona Crisis has already led us to begin to rethink and rebuild the transport system and we should continue to do so with true sustainability as the guiding principle. Climate change, poor local air quality, inadequate active travel routes, inefficient use of road space and the need to regenerate town and city centres all require urgent and concerted action. A total rethink of transport spending priorities is the only way to address these issues. There is no need to reinvent the wheel: there are many examples from around the world where the right transport choices have led to vibrant town and city centres, well used integrated public transport networks, and improved public health by making active travel a normal daily activity.
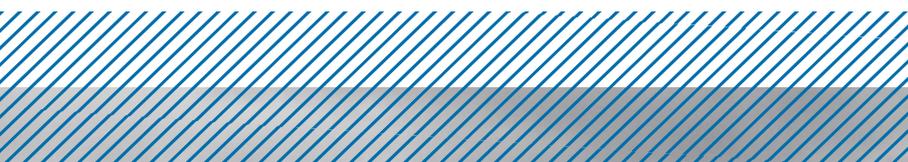
INVESTMENT PRIORITIES FOR PUBLIC TRANSPORT

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NOW'S THE TIME TO INVEST IN PUBLIC TRANSPORT

Alongside short-term stimulus measures there is now a reinforced need for long-term infrastructure planning and development. It is essential that the right decisions are taken to ensure that it is a green transport system that is developed and investment in unsustainable modes, so much a part of the latter half of the 20th century, is confined to the dustbin of history. Green infrastructure investments can be part of the solution in getting the country up and running and boosting local jobs. During the Corona Crisis we have seen active travel infrastructure measures implemented at a speed previously unknown. Meanwhile, the rail industry has come together to plan and implement changes at short notice. We now need to capture that impetus and drive forward public transport enhancements cutting through the normal lengthy and protracted processes to deliver improvements in a new rapid timescale.

Equally, a unique opportunity now exists to integrate the various public transport modes and enhance active travel routes as natural feeders to transport hubs. Renewing and developing the public transport network should go hand in hand with further steps to encourage modal shift from the car and the plane to more sustainable modes. Looking at each mode in turn a clear set of necessary measures emerges.

BUS

Bus remains the primary public transport option and urgent measures were already needed to reverse the decline in patronage that was affecting bus services well before the coronavirus caused the massive decline in use that we are seeing today. Throughout urban areas, and on trunk roads, bus priority measures are required including extension of bus lanes and priority measures at junctions.

Bus journey times should be reliable and competitive with the car and only a concerted effort on priority measures will deliver those objectives.

Buses and bikes are key users of the road network and both suffer from the current very poor state of repair of many roads. A programme of reallocation of road space to both modes should be accompanied by the overall repair of the roads – a policy that would find favour with all road users who would much prefer road repairs to new road-building.[7]

To meet air quality and climate change targets there is a pressing need to upgrade and electrify the bus fleet and this is an ideal opportunity to consider a scrappage scheme for older buses. We are fortunate in Scotland to have a major bus manufacturer in Alexander Dennis so such a scheme may well encourage other nations to follow suit and would provide a boost to our manufacturing capacity and supply chain.

LIGHT RAIL

Around the world light rail is playing an increasing role in enhancing the public transport offering. This is the result of its efficiency in moving large numbers of people on key transport corridors and electric propulsion generating zero emissions at the point of use. Scotland lags behind other countries in developing this mode of transport with only Glasgow Subway and Edinburgh Trams currently operating. Unlike in England, light rail was excluded from the government support that has been awarded to bus operators, demonstrating the secondary status to which light rail is unfairly relegated in the Scottish transport network. There is potential for many more light rail developments, including the use of tram-train technology which can play a role alongside heavy rail in re-connecting communities. Indeed both Dundee and Aberdeen have populations which would justify the development of light rail systems in many European countries so we should not just be looking at the Central Belt when developing light rail.

HEAVY RAIL

The Corona Crisis has created an unexpected opportunity to reform the rail industry and tackle some of the long-standing issues such as fares, ticketing and closer integration between train and track. Many aspects of the Williams Rail Review[8] will still be relevant but wholesale restructuring is now much easier. Whilst travel patterns will no doubt change, investment in rail will allow it to be in a much stronger position to win traffic from air on Anglo-Scottish routes and will strengthen its position as an essential component in urban and inter-city travel within Scotland. Infrastructure investments in Scotland should focus on modernising the railway to ensure network wide decarbonisation through electrification and that journey times by train can compete with those by car, as was set out as a goal of the Scottish Government in NPF3 in 2014.[9]

We are fortunate to have a number of world-famous rural rail routes which provide essential travel for local communities and are major tourist attractions in their own right. They can play a major part in helping to market Scotland; Community Rail Partnerships, tourism bodies, the railway industry and government need to work closely to help maximise the potential of these routes. In addition we need to start planning now for a new generation of rolling stock – one that matches best practice around the world. Additionally projects will be needed to re-connect communities to the rail network and so allow access to better paid jobs in more affluent population centres and the regeneration of areas currently without rail services. We propose that a target should be set to connect all communities with a population over 10,000 to the rail network. That will involve reversing some of the Beeching-era closures and creating new routes.

FERRIES

For Island communities ferries provide a vital lifeline and are in themselves an important part of the tourist offering. By providing proper integration with other public transport modes ferries can play a major part in the development of a truly integrated network right across Scotland. Additionally the islands are an attractive destination for cyclists and foot passengers who in turn will tend to stay longer and spend more locally than motorists and ferries provide the key link to the islands.

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CONCLUSIONS

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The drop in public transport patronage during the lockdown has been unprecedented in its scale and extent. In the third week of lockdown Transport Scotland estimated that rail travel had gone down by 90% and concessionary bus journeys by 95% against normal travel patterns.[10] While restricting access to public transport to key workers was essential for an effective lockdown, restrictions are now beginning to be eased, which creates a new phase of uncertainty for public transport operators and users. Even given the welcome temporary financial support provided to public transport operators for the duration of the lockdown, these companies are likely to have suffered severe financial repercussions, and the long-term impacts on public transport patronage are uncertain.

The Corona Recovery is still evolving, but it is evident that while the health emergency will pass, the Climate Emergency will continue to worsen unless we take urgent action. The same holds true for our poor public health record and the health impacts of air pollution and inactive lifestyles. Meanwhile, as we emerge from the lockdown, the economic impacts of the virus will highlight an ever more pressing need to protect and regenerate our town and city centres. A sustainable transport system with a comprehensive public transport network at its core has a major role to play in addressing all these challenges and it is therefore essential that we rebuild a sustainable and robust public transport network.

The immediate future may prove difficult for public transport operators and those who rely on it for their mobility but the vital role played by public transport in our society must be borne in mind at all stages of the recovery so that we can go on to build bigger and better networks as we face up to the future challenges. We should not forget lessons from history of previous major disruptions to society. These events pass and dim in people's memory and life returns to normal – albeit this may be a 'new normal'. Crucially, this disruption has created a unique platform from which to rethink, rebuild and enhance the public transport offering, and ensure that Scotland's Corona Recovery is a Green and Just Recovery.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1   REBUILD TRUST IN PUBLIC TRANSPORT

In the short- to medium-term, the Scottish Government and public transport operators should **rebuild trust in public transport** by publishing guidelines and putting in place measures to ensure the safety of staff and passengers. The messaging on using public transport should be clear, unambiguous and well-coordinated between the government and public transport operators. The Scottish Government should carry out a comprehensive risk assessment of the different transport modes so that risks and benefits are fully understood and widely communicated.

2   DELIVER ON BUS PRIORITY PROMISES

The Scottish Ministers should instruct Transport Scotland to urgently **implement bus priority on the Glasgow motorway network**. Over recent months, Local Authorities have been scrambling to implement 'Spaces for People' schemes on local streets, yet there has been zero progress by Transport Scotland in implementing the 'Managed Motorways' programme promised in the 2019 Climate Emergency Programme for Government. In parallel with this, **Local Authorities need to put in place their own plans for bus priority**, utilising the £500m 'Bus Partnership Fund' commitment made in September 2019.

3 INVEST IN SCOTLAND'S ELECTRIC BUS FLEET

Glasgow will be the centre of world attention in November 2021 when COP26 is held in the city. Scottish Ministers have the opportunity to ensure that Scotland can showcase zero-emission public transport to a global market – but only if decisive action is taken now to **invest in new fleets of iconic electric buses made in Scotland**. We have world-leading low- and zero-emission bus manufacturers in Falkirk's Alexander Dennis Limited, as well as global bus operators in First and Stagecoach. Scotland hasn't made cars for decades: it's time for the Scottish Ministers' ambitions to focus on buses rather than cars.

4 PLAN NOW FOR LIGHT RAIL

Scottish local authorities, with support from the Scottish Government, should progress the **development of light rail networks** in their cities. Edinburgh is currently extending its tram line to Leith and Newhaven, and has aspirations for further expansion. We support the Glasgow Connectivity Commission's call for a comprehensive 'Glasgow Metro' rapid transit system. Aberdeen and Dundee had sizable tram networks until the 1950s, and it is long overdue for these cities to bring forward their own proposals for light rail development.
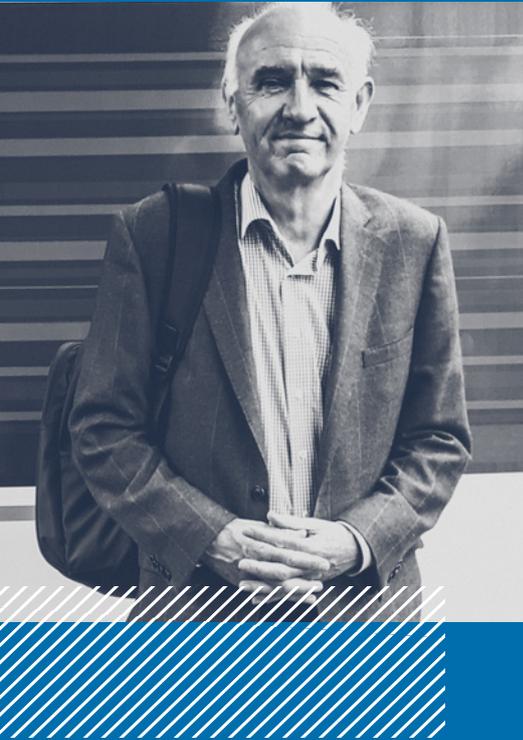
5 ELECTRIFY SCOTLAND'S INTER-CITY RAIL NETWORK

Scottish Ministers need to ensure urgent progress on a **rolling programme of electrification and capacity enhancements** to link all major Scottish cities by a modern and efficient rail system. Electrification of the Edinburgh-Glasgow line was welcome, but there has been no progress on the routes from the Central Belt to Aberdeen and Inverness. Three-quarters of Scottish diesel trains will need to be replaced by 2030, and the infrastructure has to be in place to ensure that zero-emission trains can run on our railways. Electrification of these routes will also assist rail freight, speeding up transits, improving route capacity, and further cutting carbon emissions compared to road haulage.

ENDNOTES:

1. https://www.transport.gov.scot/publication/scottish-transport-statistics-no-38-2019-edition/chapter-1-road-transport-vehicles/

2. https://www.transport.gov.scot/publication/covid-19-transport-trend-data-8-14-june-2020/

3. http://www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/report.aspx?r=12702&mode=pdf

4. http://www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/report.aspx?r=12702&mode=pdf

5. https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/18379160.coronavirus-death-rate-covid-england-nearly-twice-high-scotland/

6. https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/fear-transit-bad-cities/612979/

7. See, for example, the ScotPulse opinion poll for Transform Scotland (May 2014) which found that '84% of respondents agreed that the Scottish Government should give priority to fixing the existing road network before building new roads.'

8. https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/the-williams-rail-review#:~:text=The%20review%20will%20make%20recommendations,by%20independent%20chair%2C%20Keith%20Williams.

9. https://www.gov.scot/publications/national-planning-framework-3/

10. https://www.transport.gov.scot/publication/covid-19-transport-trend-data-14-19-april-2020/

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Paul is the Convener of Transform Scotland's Policy Forum. He spent most of his career in environmental management in the water industry and was formerly a General Manager with Scottish Water. Paul was born in Yorkshire where he started his career in the water industry before moving to Scotland in 1980. He qualified as Member of the Royal Society of Chemistry and a Fellow of the Institution of Water and Environmental Management. He has had a long-term interest in sustainable transport and its relationship to individuals' quality of life and the built environment. He is a member of the steering group of Capital Rail Action Group (CRAG), who he represents on the Policy Forum of Transform Scotland. Paul also represents Transform Scotland on Transport Scotland's High-Speed Rail Partnership Group and ScotRail's Stakeholder Advisory Panel – which he Chaired for three years from 2016 to 2019. He is on the Committee of the Scottish Association for Public Transport and was the Chair of Transform Scotland between October 2006 and October 2010. Currently Paul spends most of his time at Transform Scotland focussing on rail issues aiming to influence the agenda for rail expansion within Scotland and on cross-border services. He is particularly proud of the part that Transform Scotland played in helping to ensure that a tram system was delivered in Edinburgh.

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