



OFF TRACK

A review of the Government's performance on its sustainable transport commitments

INTRODUCTION

The past year has made the extent of the climate crisis even more stark. Whether it be devastating floods in Pakistan, apocalyptic dust clouds over New York, or wildfires and heatwaves across Europe, it's now clear that decades of inaction on climate pollution have brought climate collapse closer and closer to our own doorsteps.

This report documents the progress – or otherwise – on transport policy commitments made in the Scottish Government's 2019 Programme for Government, which took the 'Climate Emergency' as its central theme, and some key pledges made subsequent to then, for example in the 2021 Bute House Agreement, which also aimed at cutting carbon.

Emissions from transport remain stubbornly high

We must end our reliance on fossil fuels as quickly as possible. And transport, at 36% the largest single source of emissions, has a massive role to play in this. But while other sectors of the Scottish economy, most notably energy supply, have successfully decarbonised, transport emissions remain almost as high as they were in 1990.

So this leads us to conclude that Scottish Government action in transport to tackle the climate crisis remains firmly 'Off Track'.

We need an urgent focus on delivering a zero-carbon transport system. For this to happen, we need the right infrastructure in place and the correct incentives to make this a reality. Walking, wheeling and cycling should be the norm for short-distance journeys. Buses should have priority over cars across the road network. Trams and metro systems should be reinstated in our major cities. Railways should be the fastest and easiest way to travel longer distances. And we must see progress in clearing the backlog in ferry and port infrastructure which provides a lifeline for rural and island communities – something which has been known about for at least the past decade.

A fossil free future?

This year, Transform Scotland has been focusing on a 'Fossil Free Future' for our public transport network.

We need zero-emission bus fleets across Scotland, not just in isolated pockets of the country. For this, amongst other things, we'll need continued

financial support to bridge the gap between the cost of diesel and zero-emission buses, as well as investment in electricity supply across the country.

We need a decarbonised railway, but this will require a rolling programme of electrification on intensively-used lines, and early commitment to rolling stock orders to deliver an electric inter-city network, and battery or hydrogen trains on rural lines.

And we need to see progress maintained on ferry replacement. We'd suggest electrifying those parts of the fleet which can be battery-powered (short-distance, smaller vessels) and good investment decisions so that we're not procuring larger, heavier vessels which will be harder to decarbonise later on.

A radical reset to zero carbon is urgently required

But these zero-carbon priorities need to be taken forward in the context of severely-constrained public finances. So we need to be clear on how this investment can be financed: this is not something that Transform has been shy of doing before, and we'll be presenting new proposals soon.

But we also need to reset existing investment priorities. Various Scottish administrations have spent the past two decades locking high-carbon into our transport system by prioritising spending on new roads, dwarfing low-carbon transport investment. This continues to this day with the unaffordable commitments to spend over £6bn on dualling the A9 and A96 roads.

But how does this fit with the much-vaunted commitments to moving to 'net zero' by 2045?

The simple answer is that it makes no sense at all, and represents a colossal failure of responsibility in tackling the climate crisis that is now ravaging the planet.

This is why it's now imperative that we see a genuinely radical reset towards zero-carbon investment, with the nice soundbites about 'net zero' replaced by investment decisions prioritising low-carbon investment over the failed transport priorities that have led us so far off track in the first place.

Colin Howden
Director, Transform Scotland

PFG SUSTAINABLE TRANSPORT COMMITMENTS

KEY:



Progress good
and/or target likely
to be reached



Progress slow
and/or risk of
missing target



No progress
and/or target is
unlikely to be
reached



Increase the Active Travel Budget



Decarbonise Bus Fleets



Under 22s Free Bus Travel



Bus Priority Infrastructure Investment



Bus Priority on Glasgow Motorways



Decarbonise Rail Services by 2035



Low Emission Ferries



Fair Fares Review



Car Traffic Reduction



Phase Out of ICE Vehicles



INCREASE THE ACTIVE TRAVEL BUDGET

Programme for Government 2021-22:

“Ensure that at least £320 million or 10% of the total transport budget goes on active travel by 2024-25”

Progress

The most recent Scottish Budget and Capital Spending Review both indicate a rising proportion of the transport budget being spent on active travel (from 4.3% to 5.3%). However, this still means that a significant increase in investment is required next year if the commitment is to be met.

Comment

The Scottish Government has done well to recognise the climate and public health benefits of active travel, as Scotland now leads the rest of the devolved nations on active travel spend per head. However, recent funding delays and cuts to funding for third sector organisations vital to the delivery of active travel have gone some way to undermine this unprecedented commitment to investment. Inconsistent funding patterns can lead to a loss of skills in the sector, and disruption to project delivery. It is also crucial that the capacity of local authorities is urgently increased in order to ensure sufficient staff and resources are available to utilise the increased funding effectively.

DECARBONISE BUS FLEETS



Programme for Government 2021-22:

“remove the majority of diesel buses from public transport by the end of 2023”

Progress

Since the announcement of this commitment, the Scottish Government has made available £120m in funding through the Scottish Zero Emission Bus Challenge Fund (ScotZEB). To date, £62m has been awarded to support 276 zero emission buses and charging infrastructure with applications from consortium bids open for the remaining £58m until September 2023. Although this significant investment has seen the share of low emission bus registrations growing significantly in the last 18 months, the most recent data available (from June 2022) reported that just 6% of the public service bus fleet were battery electric, whilst 85% remained diesel powered.

Comment

In last year's report, we forecast that 16% of the bus fleet would be decarbonised by the end of 2023, and we have found no evidence to suggest any improvement on that figure. Although we are pleased to see progress on rolling out electric buses in Scotland, with only four months left to meet the target to remove the *majority* of diesel buses from public transport, it is evident that this commitment will not be met on schedule. This target was extremely ambitious given the timescales involved, so the fact that the target will not be met is disappointing but, ultimately, unsurprising.



UNDER 22S FREE BUS TRAVEL

Programme for Government 2021-22:

“provide nationwide free bus travel for Scotland’s young people aged under 22 from 31st January 2022”

Progress

The Free Bus Travel Scheme launched on schedule in January 2022, with all young Scots between 5 and 21 years old eligible for a card that allows them free bus travel across Scotland. As of June this year, the scheme has seen Scotland’s under 22s make 68 million journeys by bus.

Comment

At the time of launch, the scheme saw a relatively low uptake rate as a result of a complex application process and lack of a national information campaign. However, these issues have since been addressed and the initiative has been successful in allowing young people to travel, expand their horizons and participate in increased education and leisure activities.

BUS PRIORITY INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENT



Programme for Government 2019-20:

“invest over £500 million in improved bus priority infrastructure to tackle the impacts of congestion on bus services and raise bus usage”

Progress

To date, just over 5% of the available funding from the Bus Partnership Fund (£25.8m) has been allocated, with the money being spent on a combination of ‘quick win’ projects, and preparatory appraisals and development work.

Comment

Funding allocation has been slow, with the first round allocated nearly two years after the Fund was announced and no money yet allocated for substantive infrastructure improvements. The Bus Partnership Fund announcement was a strong commitment to supporting Scotland’s declining bus sector but failure to deliver the funds in a timely manner is undermining the ability of the sector to bounce back from the pandemic. While the original intention was that the Fund would be expended within 5 years (i.e. an average of £100m per annum), the Fund is currently being spent at less than £9m per annum. The inability of local authorities to draw down funding and deliver bus priority is likely to have exacerbated fare increases and service cuts.



BUS PRIORITY ON GLASGOW MOTORWAYS

Programme for Government 2019-20:

“beginning plans to reallocate road space on parts of the motorway network around Glasgow to high-occupancy vehicles such as buses”

Progress

No progress has been made to reallocate road space on the M8, M77 and M80. The only update is that design development and business case work is being undertaken, with little to indicate publication or action in the short term.

Comment

There is an urgent need for support for bus services, particularly after severe drops in patronage as a result of the pandemic, yet there appears to have been a complete absence of progress on this commitment in the past four years. Transport Scotland expects local authorities to take forward bus priority schemes on local roads. So it demonstrates a massive dereliction of duty from Scotland’s national transport agency that it has completely failed to take any action to meet Ministerial commitments for bus priority on the trunk road network, a network that it itself owns and operates.

DECARBONISE RAIL SERVICES BY 2035

Programme for Government 2019-22:

“reduce emissions from Scotland’s railways to zero by 2035”

Progress

Transport Scotland’s ‘Rail Services Decarbonisation Action Plan’ (DAP), published in May 2020, sets out a detailed plan for decarbonisation of the railway by 2035, with plans for extensive electrification coupled with orders for new trains, for suburban, inter-city and rural fleets.

Despite success in achieving 76% of passenger and 45% of freight journeys on electric traction in Scotland, only 40.7% of single track kilometres (stk) on Scotland’s rail network is electrified and no electrification project has been completed since July 2020.

Comment

The end date for rail decarbonisation is now only 12 years away and progress to date is slow. Only the Barrhead and East Kilbride lines are approved for electrification with passive provision to be provided on the Levenmouth line. There is an urgent need to start work on the partial electrification of the Borders and Fife lines coupled with placing orders for new trains to run on these lines. However, none of this has been approved and we understand that a review of the DAP is to be published this year.

The Railway Industry Association has said that Scotland will need to electrify at a rate of 120 single track kilometres (stk) for the next 12 years, and that a rolling work programme is the most efficient way to accomplish this as it will help to retain skilled staff and bring down unit costs. One more hopeful sign is the commitment of £160m to upgrade electricity supplies on routes that are earmarked for electrification.





LOW EMISSION FERRIES

Programme for Government 2021-22:

“We will ensure that 30% of state owned ferries are low emission by 2032”

Progress

The share of low emission ferries has remained at 8% throughout the past 5 years. However, six new major vessels are due by 2026 and a replacement programme for ten new small ferries is now being prepared. The programme seeks to deliver vessels that utilise the latest battery and onshore charging solutions to reduce fossil fuel consumption.

Comment

The pace of ferry replacement has accelerated recently in light of the belated recognition of the lack of investment in the ferry fleet and its associated infrastructure. This, in addition to CMAL's firm financial commitment to reducing its carbon footprint, means there is a reasonable chance of achieving the government's target. However, as we stated last year, although the ferry replacement programme is on track by the government's own measures, we would question whether the commitment itself is strong enough to significantly reduce climate emissions from maritime transport.

FAIR FARES REVIEW

Programme for Government 2021-22:

“commission a Fair Fares Review to ensure a sustainable and integrated approach to transport fares”

Progress

A slow start was made on this commitment, with no progress made in the year since its announcement. The Fair Fares Review had advised that a report would be available in June 2023 but this has now been delayed until October.

Comment

The delay in delivery of this commitment has been attributed to the rapid turnover in transport ministers in recent months. However, it is as likely due to the uncertainty around ongoing levels of financial support for public transport. Given the ongoing damage to public transport patronage caused by the pandemic, further delay here risks further undermining the future of Scotland's public transport services. Increased fares will inevitably leave more Scots facing transport poverty in the cost of living crisis. As such, it is crucial that urgent action is taken to address fare pricing and structures to make public transport accessible for all.





CAR TRAFFIC REDUCTION

Programme for Government 2021-22:

“achieve a 20% reduction in car kilometres driven by 2030”

Progress

In 2022, the Scottish Government published a ‘route map’ for achieving the target, which was consulted upon. It has subsequently commissioned research into the equitable options for demand management to discourage car use. However, both are as yet unpublished and the Climate Change Committee warned in December 2022 that the target was ‘significantly off track’.

Comment

As anticipated, the significant reduction in car travel during the pandemic was followed by a rebound in car use as restrictions eased. Transport Scotland modelling shows that sustained reductions in car use by 2030 will require the design, approval and implementation of road traffic demand management measures such as road pricing. However, despite progress in incentivising sustainable modes (such as free bus travel for under-22s), demand management measures are yet to enter the design phase. As such, we echo the view of the Climate Change Committee and question the likelihood of this target being met in time without significant and urgent action being taken.

PHASE OUT OF ICE VEHICLES

Programme for Government 2019-20:

“creating conditions to phase out the need for all new petrol and diesel vehicles in Scotland’s public sector fleet by 2030”



Progress

The Government has since widened the phase out to all new cars (rather than only public sector vehicles) and current figures illustrate that there has been a 12-fold increase in new electric vehicle (EV) car sales in the last 5 years. Meanwhile, in 2022, the Scottish Government published ‘A Network Fit For The Future: Draft Vision for Scotland’s Public Electric Vehicle Charging Network’. This included an electric vehicle infrastructure fund which intends to see £60m spent on doubling the size of the public charging network to at least 6,000 charge points by 2026.

Comment

Given that procurement decisions of fleet operators have a huge impact on the wider vehicle market, the Scottish Government is right in its approach for public sector fleets to lead on ending petrol and diesel new vehicles. Nevertheless, given that 66% of new registrations in 2022 were for petrol and diesel vehicles and analysis from the Climate Change Committee suggests that progress in EV uptake is losing momentum, the Government must not lose sight of its commitments to phase out the transport sector’s top polluters.

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With thanks to members of the Transform Scotland Policy Forum for their input to the report, as well as those Transform Scotland members who also assisted the report preparation.

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