

COVID-19 will have a profound long-term impact on transport policy and travel patterns, but rapid change is less likely

[Greg Marsden](#) and [Iain Docherty](#) find that the pandemic has accelerated some transport policy commitments that were already planned, but at a time of huge stress on the government, the potential to deliver radical policy adaptation was limited. However, COVID-19 is still recognised as being a potentially path-changing disruption to existing trajectories in terms of the adaptations to business practices, industry structures, ways of working and the public finances.

As road traffic levels creep back towards [their pre-pandemic levels](#) and public transport lags behind, it is tempting to come to the conclusion that, as we emerge from social distancing restrictions, transport is in a far worse state than it was when the pandemic started.

What happened to the [excited visions](#) of a more sustainable future as traffic disappeared and levels of walking and cycling skyrocketed in Spring 2020? In a [recent study](#) looking at the evolving policy response to the pandemic, we reflect on why rapid change was never likely to happen. This is not to say that the pandemic will not have a profound impact on policy and travel patterns for the decades that follow.

Our first reflection is that policymakers like to deal in simple stories. Our wider research project has been tracking [behavioural response](#) of a cohort of individuals over time. When you look under the headlines, you see a very different pattern of behaviour to the popular narrative or the aggregate statistics. One example of this was a presumption that there would be a dash to the car to replace public transport. [New](#) and [used](#) car sales both fell substantially in 2020 and in our survey as many people gave up a car as bought one. When we look at the growth in car traffic reported by the Department for Transport it is tempting to see car traffic as 'back to normal', but when we speak with local authorities, the peak has yet to return to anything like pre-pandemic levels.

There are clearly changes in leisure and personal business patterns underway in response to the economy re-opening. It is important to remember that the commute accounts for 20% of distance travelled on our roads and almost a half of our sample carried on having to travel to work, largely by car. We should not expect the roads to be empty, but neither is the work from home category insignificant. Our analysis suggests that if those who are currently working from home continue to do so half of the time they currently do, we would still see traffic reductions in the morning peak broadly equivalent to those seen during a school half term. The story beneath the headline is anything but simple.

A second reflection is that there are also areas which are invisible to policymakers. Of particular importance is walking. The main places where walking activity is counted is in town and city centres – the very places where most people have not been. In our work there has been an increase of 56% of people walking three times a week or more. It is hard to think of other examples a more substantial public health policy swing and yet it is almost invisible in the policy landscape. So, it seems absolutely clear that, when you look past the aggregate scale, things are most definitely not 'back to normal'.

However, it is hard to shake the feeling that the time for radical policy intervention has passed. We have seen a slew of policies which were in the pipeline such as the [Williams-Shapps Rail Review](#), [Bus Back Better](#), and [Gear Change](#) come along, but whilst they all adapt to some of the realities of COVID-19, they offer limited deviation from previous policy thinking. We should not be surprised by this more incremental approach, not least because there is a well-established view that changing entrenched socio-technical systems like transport is extremely challenging and slow moving. Personnel, resources, and parliamentary time were also stretched to bursting so what has been produced is in many respects remarkable.

Charles Lindblom's foundational work on '[muddling through](#)' suggests that just because policy changes are incremental does not mean that they will not add up to provide radical or path altering outcomes. This feels more like the waters in which we are currently swimming. The current policy adaptations have put in place some important sticking plasters but there are some real 'where next?' questions to answer. These will have profound implications for the balance between public transport, cycling, walking and the car and, therefore, our achievement of a rapid transition to a zero carbon transport system.

For those who can, how the transition from working from home to a more blended home and workplace environment plays out is critical. Our research suggests this could take 12 to 24 months or even longer and it is a complicated story of personal preferences, business policies, and social adaptation. It matters hugely to peak demand and therefore the viability and scale of some public transport services. Cut back on provision too early and we risk creating a negative spiral away from public transport, yet the costs of subsidising underutilised capacity will be strongly challenged in a tightening fiscal environment. Will the Treasury have the strategic patience it requires to make the right rather than the rapid decisions on adjusting support for public transport?

Cycle use faces a similarly critical period. Our survey shows that those who work from home more are more likely to be either rail or cycle commuters. So, the fact that cycling is currently higher, without many commuters, than pre-pandemic levels is potentially a huge success. The key question is whether more occasional leisure cyclists can be converted to more regular commute cyclists. The next year is a major opportunity to reinforce the greater experience of cycling we have seen and to normalise this. This might take the kind of vision and political leadership shown by Anne Hidalgo in [Paris](#).

[Our research](#) therefore concludes that the pandemic still represents a critical path changing event with huge potential long-term ramifications for transport. What seems less clear is whether the policy appetite remains to continue to significantly intervene to reshape how we travel.

Note: the above draws on the authors' [published work](#) in *Transport Policy*.

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