

Welsh Parliament Economy, Skills and Infrastructure Committee  
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## Risks and opportunities arising from the COVID-19 pandemic for transport policy and delivery in Wales

### Key issues

The pandemic has shifted travel demand more fundamentally than any other event in modern times. It has shown how peoples' travel behaviour can adapt in a number of ways but the question is for how long can these new behaviours continue and will there be a lasting legacy? In addition to this key question is the extent to which people can be influenced in how and when they travel and what can be done to enable them to adopt sustainable travel behaviour. They will have seen during the lockdown period what could be achieved in terms of improved air quality, far less noise and safer streets.

There are some basic tenets – pre-COVID-19, the overwhelming problem was that of car dependency which has a direct effect on congestion (economic impacts) and air quality (health impacts). Every strategy seeking to widen transport options and promote sustainable modes comes back to this problem. There is no instant panacea and most areas have shied away from introducing any measures that could be seen as penalising motorists. The only examples are London's Congestion Charge, Nottingham's Workplace Parking Levy and the introduction of Low Emission Zones for which vehicle use is charged according to emissions. Public acceptance for any fiscal measures or restraints of car use are invariably met with considerable hostility – this is only avoidable if the benefits are clear and extensive. While there is consensus that traffic congestion and poor air quality have adverse effects, promoting measures that feature sustainable transport can be difficult.

The growth in demand for rail travel over recent years has shown that a shift from car can be achieved. Conversely, local bus services have continued to suffer from a range of problems of which traffic congestion is one major influence that has fed the decline in bus use. This is a major problem because bus services provide many of the solutions to traffic congestion and car-dependency.

### Necessary changes

Against this background, the pandemic has shown that passenger transport services are financially fragile and will take a long time to recover. However, they provide vital means of transport across society, not just key workers. It is also evident that returning to the pre-pandemic network is not a viable route to take. For buses, re-creating a service that was failing would be illogical. Instead there are some significant opportunities. The greater proportions of walking and cycling are very encouraging but may not be a lasting legacy

unless measures are taken to address car dependency. All these strands are linked and without a comprehensive approach, transport will continue to struggle.

### Aligning policy

Transport policy in Wales has highlighted how transport matters as part of the wider agenda of wellbeing. Increased awareness of walking and cycling brought about by the pandemic is to be welcomed and has drawn out issues of safety such as cycling on the road network, the health benefits of walking and the need to re-prioritise how infrastructure is used optimally. This approach could usefully be extended across the transport spectrum i.e. defining the value of measures by their outcomes rather than their economic performance alone. This comes back to the key problem of excessive car use, exacerbated by poor land use planning decisions, a lack of adaptability in the way bus services operate and entrenched behaviours. Any public transport proposal should be considered in this wider concept alongside the recognition that excessive car use adversely affects virtually everything else.

For bus services, major steps need to be taken to attract new users, most of whom are currently car users. Bus networks tend to be based on past travel patterns, hampered by unpredictable traffic and poor perceptions of bus travel. Buses need to offer much more to respond to the pandemic's widespread changes. Historically, the main purpose of bus journeys has been for work and shopping; both of these have changed hugely. Many more people are able to work at home and unemployment is likely to erode bus use further. New services could target concentrations of employment and operate at times when people need them. Online retailing and the ailing high street means that fewer people shop by bus but concentrations of retail activity could be better served with appropriate services at evenings and weekends to reflect changing shopping habits. Better links between trains and buses remain an aspiration but this will be most effective if there is a wider target to include integrated timetables, passenger information and ticketing and possibly considering other modes as well such as taxis and cycle (or scooter) hire. Fundamentally, the reliability and punctuality of bus and coach services will require more emphasis on-street which means dealing with traffic delays. Demand management measures affecting car users must be in place if there is to be any incentive to shift to bus services.

Much has been debated about how bus services are planned and operated but falling demand remains the big issue. Funding for transport can be complex, selective and of limited benefit unless there is a re-think about what infrastructure is needed (possibly not much if existing infrastructure is used differently), what revenue funding is needed, particularly post-pandemic and how new revenue streams can be created. This ties in with restraints on car use if measures such as road user charging or workplace parking are to be addressed successfully. By implication, highway authorities and municipal bus operators need to collaborate more to ensure that key objectives are being addressed.

The problems are well-rehearsed but the solutions now need to be wider and deeper if broader objectives for the environment, economy, health and communities are to be met.