

Transport Select Committee Call for Evidence on Coronavirus: implications for transport

Submission by the Independent Transport Commission (ITC), October 2020

Introduction:

The Independent Transport Commission (ITC) is Britain's leading pan transport and land use research charity. Our remit is to explore longer-term, strategic policy issues, and our focus is therefore on those 'big picture' topics that underpin policy formation. The coronavirus crisis has had one of the most serious impacts on transport in our lifetimes, and to address the challenges arising for policy makers the ITC has conducted an industry-wide consultation. This submission reflects the main views and issues raised through that consultation, and provides insights on the implications for longer-term policy making.

Acceleration of existing trends:

The coronavirus crisis has accelerated a number of trends that were already impacting transport and travel demand. These include:

- An increase in homeworking and fewer commuters needing to travel five days a week to the office.
- Increased take-up of active travel options, including walking and cycling, as well as semi-active modes such as e-bikes and e-scooters.
- A rise in online shopping, causing increased use of Light Goods Vehicles (LGVs) in urban areas, and a corresponding fall in retail visits and bus use (for which shopping is the main journey purpose).
- The provision of sophisticated real-time journey information systems, e.g. to show train/bus loading, timetable changes and alternative travel choices.

Impacts upon modal shift:

- Fears about virus transmission and lockdown messaging have made the private car seem more attractive relative to public transport. Many respondents expressed concern about this development and questioned how the Government would persuade people to return to using public transport. The longer people avoid public transport, the harder it will be to prevent long-term modal shift towards the car. Rebuilding confidence in public transport will entail clear messaging for face mask requirements and explaining how operations have been modified to protect against virus transmission (for example better cleaning regimes, ventilation systems and resistant materials).
- While there has been increased use of walking and cycling during the crisis, it is not yet clear whether this will result in long-term behavioural change. Winter conditions that are colder and wetter are less conducive to walking and cycling than in summer, so there could be a switch back to alternative modes over the coming months. Semi-active transport, such as e-bikes and e-scooters, could increase the distances that are travelled for local trips and replace some car journeys.

Land Use changes and implications for transport:

- The coronavirus crisis has forced us to spend more time in our local areas, and the rise of walking and cycling has meant local hubs within cities have become more important. The idea of the 15-minute city, in which a person's average daily needs can be reached within a 15-minute walk radius, is likely to become more attractive. This can also apply to 'villages' within a city, or smaller towns.

- In spite of the trend towards homeworking (particularly for workers in knowledge industries) many respondents believed the human need for interaction would continue to be important. As a result, the theory of agglomeration still holds: i.e places with good accessibility and transport links will see higher land values and economic growth.
- Concern was expressed that new housing developments must apply lessons learned from the crisis. These include the need to provide more green space, to encourage active travel and public transport, and to discourage car usage through improved street design and promotion of alternative modes. In urban planning, the value of green, less dense spaces has been evident, and planners will likely give more attention in future to the value that public spaces can offer for health, recreation, and bringing the natural world into the city. This could also include more provision for cycling and walking in cities through changes in road space design, improvements in safety and journey planning.
- The scale and nature of office use is likely to change. Working spaces will need to adapt to prove that they are better, more conducive environments for people to work and collaborate than home. This change may induce reduced demand for total office space, the introduction of more agile workspaces, high-tech meeting rooms, social facilities and lower density usage. Offices located close to transport hubs will benefit, while the overall effect will be to reduce the number of days per week or month commuters will travel and opportunities will exist to change the timing of their journeys to spread the historic peaks.

Moving forward to address policy objectives:

- The immediate reduction in congestion and improved air quality in our cities have been widely welcomed by the public, and demonstrated that policies to encourage more sustainable/ environmentally friendly travel behaviours can achieve widespread public support. Opportunities now exist to promote public transport and active travel. In order to avoid an expected increase road traffic arising from the crisis, as well as to achieve the policy objective of phasing out petrol and diesel vehicles, new road user charging mechanisms must be implemented promptly. These can incentivise behavioural change, lower emissions, and reduce congestion. ITC research has demonstrated that such schemes are publicly acceptable if the benefits are made clear.
- Travel provides important benefits for mental and social well-being (see the ITC's forthcoming *Why Travel?* book). However, some key workers do not have flexible working hours, and attention should be given to how they can travel safely at peak times. Coronavirus has affected different groups in society in different ways, and policy makers will need to ensure that the crisis does not result in greater social exclusion or poorer access to transport amongst lower-income groups, such as losing vital bus services.
- Investment in transport infrastructure will be essential to help our public transport networks recover from the crisis, and to help kick start the economy through job creation and economic stimulus. The appraisal process for transport schemes will need to be revisited to ensure that the right objectives and benefits are correctly identified. For example, journey time savings may now be less relevant than environmental and social/community benefits. Local, small-scale interventions such as active street re-design may be of immediate benefit and impact.
- Transport operators will also need public sector assistance to recover from the worst crisis in recent history with a massive reduction in passenger numbers travelling, or risk a rapid contraction in the travel services provided. Policy examples from East Asia might be instructive in terms of how to encourage the return of passengers to public transport. The aviation sector and bus/rail operations are likely to require most support and different models of funding.

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