



▲ Low-traffic neighbourhoods have many benefits

Will the pandemic help us change course in time?



Author **Glenn Lyons**

The latest PTRC Fireside Chat was an opportunity to probe whether the adage – ‘Never let a good crisis go to waste’ – would apply to the pandemic, in terms of helping us to confront the crisis of climate change and the imperative of decarbonising transport at pace.

Ahead of this Fireside Chat, the UK Prime Minister had set out a: ‘roadmap to cautiously ease lockdown restrictions in England.’ What a contrast with the very different type of roadmap we need to bring about rapid systemic change in the transport sector, if we are to draw down levels of greenhouse gas emissions at the pace required.

Many questions

In the exaggerated state of flux created by the pandemic, will it be possible to bring

about the energy transition required in the transport sector across multiple modes and tens of millions of vehicles, including putting in place clean energy production and distribution infrastructure?

Has our collective state of incarceration over many months, imposed by social distancing, helped us to appreciate our capacity to adapt to changing circumstances and to see the scope for new behaviours that tread more lightly?

Are the economy, livelihoods and people's mental health so battered that we will crave our old freedoms and resent any government looking to bring about uncomfortable, even if manageable, change? Perhaps a clue is in the overnight surge in flight bookings for foreign holidays following the PM's roadmap announcement?

Are we going to let a crisis go to waste? Has the pandemic helped in getting powerful players and influencers to pull in a new positive and bold direction of green recovery? Alternatively, are we destined to see squabbling, struggling, prevaricating and procrastinating in the ironic cause of self-preservation?

What of COP26 in Glasgow in November 2021? Is this perhaps the last chance to change direction?

Some answers

Jillian Anable, Professor of Transport and Energy, Institute for Transport Studies, University of Leeds, was concerned about the prospect ahead of economic recovery at any cost, especially if a green recovery is car led with interest in easing the burden of motorists.

She was also concerned about the prospect of high levels of domestic, if not international, leisure travel. Meanwhile, working from home will not be an option for everyone, but for those who do, some of the energy demands transfer to the home from the office and from the commute.

She expressed doubts about how much hope can be placed in rejuvenation of neighbourhoods and popularity of active travel as a decarbonisation route out of Covid-19. In other European countries noted for their achievements in this regard, transport sector emissions have nevertheless continued to rise because cars are not reined in and continue to grow in size.

Her plea was for greater attention to the bigger picture, which offers a realisation that even rapid electrification of the vehicle fleet will not get us where we need to be in time.



^ We must avoid a car-led recovery and instead favour public transport

Flight of fancy?

Andrew Curry, Director of Futures, School of International Futures, pointed to trend reversal in aviation, which, in spite of pre-pandemic expectation of substantial global growth by 2050, is currently running at levels comparable with those seen in the 1970s. When it comes to decarbonisation prospects he saw: 'no credible way to zero emissions for long-haul aviation by 2050 outside of the completely murky world of offsetting.' As a result of the pandemic, airlines are indebted to governments and are facing an imposition of conditions on future development.

He saw no likelihood of a bounce back for international aviation, with a very uneven picture of border restrictions over time. This is compounded by the most profitable part of aviation being under threat: the pandemic has reinforced a reluctance for people to travel for business now digital alternatives have been normalised.

How we plan for transport

Claire Haigh, Chief Executive, Greener Transport Solutions, recognised the many questions related to climate change, saying: 'Clearly, prior to the pandemic we were way off course . . . While economic shutdowns may have delivered some the sorts of levels of reductions needed, by definition they're not economically sustainable.'

She is encouraged by an emboldened active travel agenda and the ease with which large parts of the economy have transitioned to digital.

However, she also sees the risk of a car-led recovery just at a time when car use needs to be reduced. Such a reduction would need to be supported by a massive shift to public transport at a time when that sector is 'on its knees'.

Giving back active travel

Perhaps surprisingly, Rachel Aldred, Director, Active Travel Academy, University of Westminster, was 'a bit nervous about claiming too much for active travel' in relation to decarbonisation: 'What we need goes a long way beyond replacing five-mile car trips to the supermarket with five-mile bike trips to the supermarket.'

She cautioned that while mode shift is often seen as the key goal of active travel, it can also be a means of increasing mobility for those with restricted mobility, thereby improving their lives without necessarily reducing carbon emissions. This said, she pointed to the benefits of low-traffic neighbourhoods. Her research has revealed that after two years there was a 6% decline in car ownership, as well as over two hours a week more active travel. She was clear that alongside discouraging car use, active travel measures are a way of offering something in return.

She took issue with reference often made to technology fix vs behaviour change



→ when it comes to the decarbonisation agenda. She sees that behaviour change can imply to 'gently encourage people to do the right thing', whereas she sees it as needing to be a more systemic change that is taking place. Meanwhile, technology fix can be made to feel like an instant and straightforward solution, or certainly one that is more tangible for the public to respond to when consulted. Yet delivering 'technology fix' calls for several policy levels to bring about the system change required.

She highlighted how the temporary measures introduced in response to social distancing have also involved experimenting with communication. Communication is challenging and may not be a natural talent for some council officers, but the pandemic has revealed how quite complex science can be communicated objectively and clearly to the public: 'It's important to have a narrative that the data fits into, that the evidence fits into.'

Looking back on a profound time

Bob Moran, Head of Environment Strategy, Department for Transport, saw a long shadow from the pandemic, but also recognised that Covid-19 may have forced a lot of people to think about certain aspects of their lives – for example, holidays and reimagining the high street – quite differently, with positive consequences. He sensed the appeal of more space for people and a little less space for vehicles.

He said that while reluctant to refer to social distancing restrictions as an experiment, they have allowed new approaches to be tried out at scale, rather than remaining only thought experiments. He sees new approaches, irrespective of their immediate short-term effects, as collectively bringing about a new way of thinking about mobility and alternatives to getting in the car which are better for people.

He is at the heart of developing the government's Transport Decarbonisation Plan, and was keen to point to the ambition of 'building back better': 'If you want to decarbonise transport then you've got to tackle emissions from cars and vans and then extend that to the rest of the vehicles.'

He said he had cause to hope in terms of change to come in the next nine years, driven by legislation; vehicle manufacturers are going to 'finally embrace battery electric vehicles and zero-emission vehicles'. There is going to be a rapid emerging of more and more



▲ Active travel will play a part in the fight to tackle climate change

charging points. However, he is concerned that the roll-out of such infrastructure does not lock in car dominance in our streets.

Addressing a question from the audience regarding how investment in high-speed rail played into the decarbonisation agenda, he suggested two positive perspectives. One relates to the opportunities with a huge infrastructure project to develop and drive new behaviours in construction that could have wider industry benefits in terms of greener construction. The other concerns scope for modal shift, notably from domestic aviation to rail, but also scope for further shift from road freight to rail freight movement.

Crystallising political minds

At the end of 2020, Transport Scotland published an update to its climate change plan, covering all sectors, not just transport. One of the eye-catching commitments is to reduce car-km by 20% by 2030, compared to pre-pandemic levels. It is preparing a route map to address the changes that are required and is under no illusion that there will need to be sticks as well as carrots to bring about a reduced reliance on car use. Elections are coming up, offering a reminder of political challenges, especially in a country that has a significant and dispersed rural population.

Superfast transport planning

It was striking in many of the remarks from the panel that what we need to be doing to decarbonise resonates strongly with what many in transport planning have spent their careers seeking to achieve. In this regard, just as we have moved from the humble 56k modem for internet access to superfast broadband, we now need to unleash superfast transport planning. This said, for all that needs to happen, I felt obliged to challenge those gathered to put themselves in the shoes of the politicians who bear the brunt of all those vested interests that are lobbying for slowing things down.

I was also reminded of the saying: 'Things take longer to happen than you think they will, and then they happen faster than you thought they could.' Perhaps this applies to addressing climate change; we are frustrated by the immediate pace of change, yet momentum may be building such that change ahead will be more dramatic than we can currently imagine is achievable.

In conclusion

It seemed to me that the challenges, and opportunities, ahead were all too apparent. Each and every professional needs to continue to make best endeavours to rise to these with a hope that developments we are now looking to foster will mark the beginning of a much steeper ascent up the s-curve of development in the years ahead.

While it was not perhaps the expectation of the Fireside Chat to reach a conclusive answer to the question 'Covid-19: friend or foe for decarbonising transport?', it had been a rich and diverse exchange of insights and views.

A fitting conclusion came in the form of a comment from the audience: 'Please be encouraged you are making a difference and changes are happening, the message is getting out there. Keep moving forwards towards the tipping point.'

Glenn Lyons

Mott MacDonald Professor of Future Mobility,
University of the West of England.

📞 01173 283219

✉️ glenn.lyons@uwe.ac.uk

You can watch the full recording of the event on the CILT YouTube page.