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We need transport planners with superpowers



Author **Glenn Lyons**

How can transport cope with the pressures of the coronavirus pandemic?

In April 2020, I chaired an online panel discussion hosted by PTRC focusing on the global shock of Covid-19 and whether the pandemic will jolt the transport sector into significant change. Well before Covid-19 arrived, I had been of the view that the old mobility regime that has defined our society was destabilising, brought about by the digital age colliding and then merging with the motor age. Covid-19 has introduced a huge shock to an already destabilising mobility system.

With deep and now further deepened uncertainty comes great opportunity. The forecast-led paradigm of transport planning needs to move aside for a vision-led paradigm, I would suggest. With mobility's current state of flux, how can we take positive action to shape a better future: decide and provide instead of predict and provide?

At the heart of this is realising that we need triple access planning instead of simply transport planning. What people still need in society is access to other

people, goods, services and opportunities. The transport system provides this through physical mobility; the land-use system provides this through spatial proximity; and the telecommunications system provides access through digital connectivity. The question is, how do we configure the future of the triple access system and its use best to support the sort of society we want?

I would be surprised if we do not see Covid-19 accelerating a regime change in transport planning as well as in our



Do we need to carry on trying to build more capacity for cars?

mobility system. I must say I have been amazed by some colleagues who seem to be optimistically holding on to the idea that the old armoury of transport planning analysis and appraisal is still what we need to press on with and that the Covid-19 shock will be over relatively soon. Time will tell.

Three in one

Opening our discussion, I suggested to the panel that our sector is facing three challenges, each of which is very demanding: dealing with the here and now of the unfolding shock; dealing with transition out of Covid-19; and shaping the future of mobility in the medium to long term.

It seems to me that we are facing the fight of our professional lives. Now we must rise to all three challenges in ways that try to ensure the forces of inertia and vested interest from the old regime of mobility do not snuff out the flame of opportunity for positive change.

Fintan Geraghty, Technical Director, WSP, pointed to the threats and opportunities facing different service providers in the transport sector, with a real difficulty in being able to judge how demand would change and how quickly it would change in the weeks, months and years ahead.

While noting the current focus of attention on emergency planning, Brian Deegan, Design Engineer, Urban Movement, is hoping the Covid-19 shock is enough to force us to reflect upon how we do things as a sector. He said: 'We've been plodding on saying that "We know cars are bad, we know public transport's good, we know we should be walking and cycling more," but what we have actually been enabling is more and more growth in private car use. I'm hoping this pandemic brings with it the end of the line. It's forced people to have a different perspective on the street.'

Stages of grief

Across the profession, we may now need to recognise that individuals will be on a journey through a number of stages of grief over the (potential) demise of the old regime of mobility and transport planning. One of our audience wanted to know what was to become of all those infrastructure projects in the appraisal pipeline that are now presented with the prospect of completely reconfigured demand, not just in the immediate future but longer term.

This prompted an eminently quotable reaction from Sunita Mills, Strategic Manager Commissioning Development, Somerset Council, who said: 'If this situation has taught us one thing, it's that we've got enough capacity for cars and we probably don't need to carry on trying to build more capacity'. Let that one sink in – even if you want to challenge it.

Alison Irvine, Director of Transport Strategy and Analysis, Transport Scotland, suggested it was too early to make a call on big infrastructure projects, but noted their ability to provide a boost to the economy, as did Fintan Geraghty, pointing to the jobs created and the connectivity benefits beyond the journey times that arise from infrastructure investment.

My feeling is that two conditions need to be met for infrastructure projects now: being able to help the economy recover, and contributing positively to the sort of future transport and society that may be sought.

Greater exclusion or inclusion?

Policy-makers have long sought to adopt social inclusion objectives in their policy-making. However, the lived experience across the population often suggests otherwise. An audience member wanted to know if the shock was going to exacerbate social exclusion. Sonya Byers, Chief Executive, Women in Transport, sees opportunity. She feels that if everyone can be brought up to the same standard of access in terms of digital connectivity it will make it easier for people to interact and collaborate in a way that's going to be effective.

With big infrastructure schemes she called for us not to stick rigidly to the original plans. She said: 'Let's revisit those plans and embrace a collaborative approach to drawing in best practice in proving the inclusive nature of the designs concerned.' →



Now is the time for the profession to respond to calls for nicer places to live and better air quality

→ She acknowledged that we certainly have a skills shortage now, exacerbated by revenues being hit and businesses being challenged with reallocation of resources to crisis management. People are finding it difficult to see past the crisis period, but she believes that with the right leadership and direction transport planners can pull together.

She said: 'Look what we've achieved in just a matter of weeks as a society. Look what businesses have achieved. We've all seen businesses that said "it is not possible to work from home, it's not possible to put the infrastructure in place," but they have. They've done it, because they had to do it. Faced with a situation where we have to change, where we are forced to change, where actually it's a matter of life and death that we do this, and if we can really recognise that it's a long-term investment in the future of our nation, and the economic growth of the nation, then I think it is ultimately achievable, even though it might seem aspirational.'

Karen Agbabiaka, Chief Executive Public Realm, Islington Council, followed up by encouraging cross-sector collaboration, the likes of which have been seen on CILT's Coronavirus Resource Database. She said: 'I've noticed how all our different industries work in silos. If we can pull together and understand it's the whole and not just the part, then we may be able to introduce some of these changes.'

The public themselves are seeing a wish for a new normal. Can we as professionals galvanise that appetite? Brian Deegan said: 'We should be listening to people, in particular those people who are saying we want more walking and cycling, we want nicer places to live, we want better air quality. It's about time we changed the profession to respond to that.'

Future of transport planning and analysis

Fintan Geraghty saw that the glass was half full for the future of transport planning. He was confident that transport analysis has a powerful set of tools developed over time to help with modelling what could happen beyond the current lockdown.

I wanted to be clear on the distinction between decision-support tools and tools in terms of the sorts of measures themselves that we need to reshaping transport. It seems to me we did not need Covid-19 to show us that we need to have the modal hierarchy that the Transport Strategy in Scotland has championed and will champion in future. We did not need Covid-19 to show us that some reallocation of road space could well make sense and that we need to get this

rebalancing within the triple access system referred to at the start. Are the decision support tools still robust and serviceable, then?

Social distancing and other effects

There were several audience questions about public transport. What is to become of the season ticket if so much more flexible working could take place in future? Does public transport need to be made more affordable to support its future? A key concern was social distancing, which logically leads to an aversion to crowded, confined space such on buses and trains.

Sunita Mills admitted that she does not know what the future holds for public transport at this point. She cannot see things going back to 'before' for a long time for public transport in relation to social distancing effects and this interim state could be long lived. She sees a range of different scenarios for service provision and use. She believes that to preserve social distancing the numbers of passengers per vehicle could remain low for a prolonged period, leading to a need for more vehicles in system, which would be costly to operate and to the public purse, especially in more rural areas.

Her local authority area was struggling to provide a range of services before the Covid-19 shock, let alone now. It had been previously reliant on volunteers for hospital transport, but these have drifted away now because of the associated health vulnerabilities. She suggested there will be a need to think differently about how we provide transport in a range of different situations.

There has been significant public sector spend to support public transport in recent weeks, something that could be a growing challenge. Alison Irvine gave us some hard figures when it came to changes in passenger numbers. She said: 'We've been monitoring trends over the last few weeks in Scotland: 90% reduction in bus passengers; 95% reduction in rail passengers; 95% reduction in ferry passengers (a big issue in Scotland); 75% reduction in car use; and a 35% increase in cycling.'

In terms of scale of the challenge and where we are going to go to next, what the new normal might look like and how those scenarios play out, the level of uncertainty is massive. Scenario planning it seems will be very much needed. There could be a behavioural rebound effect beyond the lockdown, yet people may have become accustomed to the relative safety of digital for some of their activities, such as shopping.



^ The current social distancing effects on public transport could be long lived

In conclusion

I invited each of our panellists to offer a takeaway to conclude our webinar. Karen Agbabiaka is determined to see the opportunity taken to reduce silo working, to work more collaboratively and to think outside the box. Sonya Byers remains positive. She believes the other side of this crisis could deliver positive societal and transport outcomes as we come together. Brian Deegan hopes to see us be flexible enough to change some of our systems and approaches, and not just in the short term. Fintan Geraghty is also positive. He believes the outlook for our transport profession and what we can now do to help is promising. Sunita Mills wants to see us using the many skills we have in our sector in different ways: whole systems thinking, outside the old transport planning box.

Transport planners are gathering lots of information on changing travel demand and using that in a more powerful way than we have done in a long, long time. Alison Irvine said: 'Transport planners should be seen as superheroes, and we should provide the leadership that we know that we can do.'

I wanted to note that all of us engaged in these conversations are in our careers because we want to make a positive difference to the future. In this regard, I came back to my earlier remark, namely that we are as professionals facing the fight of our lives and we really have to stand up and be counted, to try and make something positive out of this.

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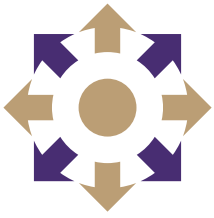
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More than 1,200 people registered for the event from around the world. Read the full report from PTRC's webinar: https://uk.linkedin.com/in/glenn-lyons?trk=author_mini-profile_title

Watch the full recording, including audience comments here:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=yf1zMOhqMXU



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