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Winner of CILT award for best practice in passenger transport (2013)

promoting quality public transport.....

Transport Committee
 House of Commons
 London SW1A 0AA

25th September 2020

Dear Committee Members,

Reforming public transport after the pandemic

1. TravelWatch NorthWest is an independent Community Interest Company representing all public transport users in North West England. We are pleased to give our views to this inquiry.

General Issues

2. The major problem we see is the return to public transport. Current discouragement to use public transport and social distancing measures do not bode well for people to be attracted back in the medium term. With home working (WFH) currently widespread there is a view that there will not be a headlong rush back to the environmentally unsustainable practice of people working in the artificial environment of the office, with their huge buildings, and acres of glass, consuming resources and energy. Indeed, many in the world of business have said that Covid 19 has brought forward working from home, electronic conferencing etc. by some 5 years plus.

3. In summary, after Covid 19:

- There will not be a universal return to working as it was before the pandemic;
- The future will see a greater proportion of WFH and flexible working as the norm;
- Many employees will work a mix of WFH and office, location working;
- The demand for office space will change, with some fall in demand, offset by greater use of serviced office space.
- Reductions in peak travel demand will lessen the pressure for investment to meet that demand. However, investment can then be directed at improving overall capacity and reliability, supported by on-board Wi-Fi.

The use of public transport and the way that people choose to travel, both locally and for longer domestic journeys

4. As we emerge from lockdowns to stop the spread of COVID-19, public transport faces a huge challenge. Operators will have to avoid overcrowding on buses, trams and trains to reduce the risk of virus transmission, while ensuring that passenger numbers are high enough to sustain the system. Meanwhile, commuters and others have been tentatively returning to public transport, but many will continue to work from home for at least part of the week, while others will only embrace it if they see it as a safe, fast and convenient way of reaching their destinations.

5. The greatest challenge faced by all public transport modes before Covid 19 was the peak/off-peak imbalance. This created major drawbacks, with a huge amount of infrastructure, resources and costs allocated to the planning, management and operation of the two daily peaks. On rail a huge investment in infrastructure – roads, additional railway tracks and signalling, control measures etc. was needed. In addition, the peak periods generated huge environmental disbenefits from noise, exhaust and tyre particulate pollution. In the future we could see greater flexible working and a mix of home and office, yet with provision for essential workers and others who must work in city and town centres. The challenge will be to develop a network that takes account of different working patterns.

6. There is growing evidence that public transport riders, even in densely populated cities like Hong Kong and Tokyo, do not face higher infection risk than anyone else. A study in France found that of the 150 infection clusters that appeared after reopening the economy, none could be traced back to public transport. Many transport systems have adopted strict cleaning protocols. Face-covering helps reduce physical distancing between riders and is effective at preventing the spread of germs in public transport. Whilst there is a need to avoid crowding on buses, trams and trains, including adding capacity where needed, social distancing will always be a barrier as long as it exists.

7. People cannot forever travel in isolation. Whilst city working may decrease, high-quality public transport in the future should be seen as a public service, serving the whole community not just for getting to work or heading from city to city, but for leisure, and social interaction, and made convenient for a much wider range of purposes. All of these activities will benefit a future greener economy.

8. That said, at the present time it is impossible to predict the patronage levels that will exist in the future for public transport. It is likely that a return to pre-pandemic levels will be slow and gradual and may take several years. When a vaccine is widely available patronage levels may still take months or years to return to 'normal'.

9. Government advice not to use bus or rail services has caused a massive reduction in patronage and there is still uncertainty about the safety of services. Notwithstanding recent setbacks, the Government needs to issue clear guidance that bus and train services should now be used. The car must not be allowed to become the dominant mode of transport for local or longer journeys. Decades of work by transport planners and operators to attract people out of their cars to reduce congestion and pollution are in danger of being destroyed.

Central and local governmental transport priorities and finances and funding for transport

10. There will inevitably be strong pressure from the Treasury to radically reduce spending on bus, tram and rail services. This could well lead to substantial reductions in existing networks including branch line closures, reductions of service levels on main lines and reduced bus services. This must be resisted as it will result in more car dependency, greater environmental impacts and increased social deprivation. The current levels of Government support for public transport must be maintained until passenger levels return to pre-pandemic levels. Otherwise policies to reduce congestion and reduce pollution will be nullified.

Rail

11. Rail franchising has now ended. We welcome the government's statement that this is "the first step in bringing Britain's fragmented network back together". In the short term there will be Emergency Recovery Management Agreements and the longer term awaits a white paper based on the Williams Review, we understand. It is unlikely that the railways will ever go back to a model where the private sector assumes the same level of risk that it did up until 2020. Many expect concession agreements to be the way forward, with the railway remaining technically nationalised but with some level of private sector involvement.

12. We have always argued that the rail industry is very fragmented and it has been argued that this model has brought with it a high cost base. Whatever the successor to franchising there is a pressing need for a strategic body in charge of the whole industry, whether that be the expansion of Network Rail's role into a Strategic Rail Authority with a 'guiding mind' or other iteration. The railways must not be run by the DfT which has tried to micromanage the industry but has lacked the skills required to exercise detailed control. An over-riding concern is the need for more co-operation amongst operators on timetabling, with a clearly recognised hierarchy of service priorities and better connections.

13. We fully agree with Committee's recent announcement that these reforms should be pressed on with more urgency. One vital element is the need to simplify fares and make it easier for regular travellers to travel for commuting

on a flexible number of days in the week, rather than the conventional season ticket which is priced on a 5 day week basis.

14. Another area is luggage. If the focus of railways post-covid is away from commuting towards more leisure travel, then carriage of passengers' luggage must take a higher priority in the design of new trains, and older trains may need internal alterations. Unfortunately, the focus has been on maximising the number of seats. Both Voyager and the new IET trains are particularly poor for luggage space. The latter now serve a major holiday route to the West Country.

15. We would not wish to see the continuation of compulsory seat reservations on long distance services. The walk-up railway is essential for many, especially commuters and others who have unpredictable journey patterns, often using long distance services for short journeys. An example is Macclesfield to Manchester where if compulsory seat reservations on Avanti West Coast persist, many passengers will be forced on to already crowded Northern and CrossCountry trains, adversely affecting social distancing on those trains instead.

Buses

16. Even at its lowest during lockdown, around 15 per cent of bus passengers still needed to be at work with no other option. The fall in passenger numbers meant that bus operators needed a bailout in April to keep services running for key workers. Public subsidy leapt from 40 per cent of bus operator revenues before Covid to potentially around 70 per cent now. Planning a core service has required that operators work closely with local transport authorities and, in some cases, with each other, e.g. by mutual acceptance of tickets. This greater public control over how public funding is used to support local transport is a step change outside of London towards the reforms envisaged in the Bus Services Act 2017.

17. The next logical step is likely to involve franchising of bus services to ensure that public funding is used effectively. Control over bus services and fare revenue is crucial to any efficient public transport system and to tip the balance towards tackling congestion. Cities need franchised bus services so that the planned £4.7 billion infrastructure investment in local transport infrastructure complements rather than competes with buses receiving higher levels of public funding.

18. Introduction of a congestion or workplace parking charge will reduce traffic levels and fund local transport investment, including subsidy for bus services. There should be greater bus priority measures across cities through bus lanes, bus gates and bus priority at junctions, to protect bus services from congestion. Cities should not get extra funding for bus services while also making them worse by forcing buses into traffic jams.

19. The biggest driver of peak hour congestion in our towns and cities has been the school trip journey by parents choosing not to send their offspring to the local school where they could go on foot or use the provided transport. Bus journey times have increased by 50% in urban areas since the 1960s, so that more buses are required to maintain any given level of frequency. Only proactive use of traffic management powers by local authorities can help to limit this effect and many are reluctant to use these powers for fear of alienating the “motor voter”. The move to 100% off-bus ticketing in London has helped to increase operating speeds there but achieving this elsewhere is impossible in the deregulated regime with a multiplicity of competing operators.

20. Employment, education and shopping activities have been moving away from the town centres which form the focus of bus networks. At the same time, centralisation of NHS facilities, banks, post offices and libraries has meant that rural dwellers have to travel further to reach their nearest one, further disadvantaging those without cars. All this means that land use and transport planning must be considered together and not in isolation.

21. Some parts of the country, notably Greater Manchester, are looking at greater local authority control of bus services. It will be interesting to see whether the implications of coronavirus will reinforce the principle of greater public control

The devolution of transport policy-making responsibilities and powers

22. Transport policy making and funding is still far too centralised in the UK, much more so than other developed countries. Where some form of devolution has been made, e.g. Transport for the North, tight control has still been maintained by the DfT and no funding allocation has been made. This has resulted in these bodies being branded as ‘talking shops’, with some justification. Even worse, more new bodies have been imposed by central government which duplicate effort and still retain control by Ministers. This must change if meaningful progress is to be made.

23. There has always been a need to achieve better integration between modes emphasised by the trend towards more walking and cycling during lockdown. Much more needs to be done, including for example a re-look at previously largely negative policies on the carrying of bicycles on trains and indeed on light rail. The importance of the whole journey experience and the need for more convenient transport interchanges and hubs cannot be understressed.

The resilience of the transport system for future crises

24. The transport industry has demonstrated its ability to respond to a crisis by maintaining good levels of service during the pandemic although they clearly could not have done so without very high levels of Government support. The resilience of the system would be greater if planned investment in rail and bus services and infrastructure was continued and hence these programmes

should be maintained. This is particularly the case in the North, e.g. for TransPennine rail services where investment has been consistently deferred or cancelled for many years.

25. Public transport must adapt to be a more attractive alternative to the private car. Much of the reasoning for this is on environmental and carbon reduction grounds as expanded on in the next section. There is also the potential to provide a fairer system of public transport. A study by the University of Dortmund, found that around 50 per cent of low-income households in the UK suffer from “transport poverty” arising from car dependency linked to poor public transport provision. Improved, affordable public transport in the areas people need it could help significantly.

The decarbonisation of transport and the capability to meet net zero carbon emissions targets by 2050

26. The need to reduce or eliminate carbon emissions is still urgent. Recent deliveries of new rail rolling stock which is wholly or partly diesel powered, even where running on electrified routes, militates against carbon reduction. Past cancellation of major light rail projects in Leeds, Liverpool and South Hampshire is a missed opportunity to install fully electrified systems and new light rail schemes should be strongly supported. The trend to introduce battery powered buses is to be welcomed but the rate of conversion is very slow in most cities and large orders for diesel buses are still being made.

27. Whilst the Covid 19 crisis has presented major problems for public transport, it has also provided some insight into what a better and more environmentally friendly future for our centres of population could be like. These conurbations must be dependent upon walking, cycling and sustainable public transport. Limitless car use cannot be an option for future mobility in cities and elsewhere. Some 22% of UK *carbon emissions arise from cars and so the UK cannot return to an excessive reliance on car travel, but must develop innovative and sustainable public transport as an alternative.*

28. Electric cars are not the answer. They will take up space and contribute to congestion in the same way as conventional cars. Cars of any power source take up space which could be used for houses, green areas, parks and other outdoor spaces. Walking, cycling and of course sustainable public transport has to be the priority for future planning.

Innovation and technological reform within transport.

29. Innovation and technological reform will no doubt have a role to play in future transport investment but by far the greatest need is for wider application of tried and tested modes including electric buses, electrification of railways and new light rail systems. New developments such as Very Light Rail (VLR) being developed for Coventry could have wider application in medium sized towns and cities if proven in service. It will not however replace the need for conventional light rail or tram-trains in larger cities. Other power sources such

as hydrogen may have a role but need to be proven in operational terms and operating costs.

30. The UK has benefited from cleaner, greener bus journeys as a result of the Green Bus Fund. The next step in the process must be totally electric buses. A possible mode is the trolleybus. These can be powered by batteries, in areas where overhead line equipment cannot be constructed. Such battery trolleybuses, which charge from overhead wires while moving, have been in use in Rome since 2005, and could be another solution for the UK cities. With hindsight, the scrapping of trolleybuses was a huge mistake. Trolleybuses were clean, quiet and if they had been retained, the technology would only have improved, as has been the case in many European cities and North America.

31. Tramways (light rapid transit) are a proven form of urban transport and can draw power from sustainable sources. Whilst tramways do offer an alternative form of urban transport, taking the Manchester Metrolink as an example, the major block to extensive expansion has been cost. There is scope for lower cost tramways. A recent development in light rail/tram is the growth of on-board fuel supplied vehicles giving catenary free vehicles powered by hydrogen fuel cells. Foshan, a city of some eight million in southern China, has rolled out the first of what will be many trams powered by hydrogen.

32. Radical change and progress in public transport data collection is needed and as soon as possible. Data collection and analysis allows transport providers to adapt services for passengers' needs. Presently, public transport mostly runs to pre-planned timetables, meaning the passenger is forced to accept what is provided, not what he/she needs. Better use of data will change that situation. Operators will be able to understand much better what the demand is and provide more customised services. Obviously, the restrictions of the network, particularly on railways and tramways will prevent pure 'on demand transport', but in other areas services can be better tailored to demand. In practice, this will mean fewer timetabled services and a more responsive transport system that can adapt quickly to rises and falls in demand.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond

Yours sincerely,

John A Moorhouse

John Moorhouse, Company Secretary