

## **Covid-19 - Transport Update**

### **Summary and Recommendations**

This report provides an overview of the ongoing challenges caused by the impact of Covid-19 on transport and sets out the COSLA response with respect to a range of transport matters in response to the current pandemic.

The Board is invited to

- i. provide feedback on emerging transport issues and recovery planning over local responses in each council, and
- ii. endorse the proposed COSLA position and next steps set out at paragraphs 23 - 25

### **References**

Previous reports:

- Environment and Economy Board October 2019 – National Transport Strategy
- Environment and Economy Board February 2020 – National Transport Strategy
- COSLA Group Leaders 27 March 2020 – Parking Enforcement and Blue Badge Scheme
- COSLA Leaders 15 May 2020 – Spaces for People
- COSLA Leaders 29 May 2020 – Spaces for People

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## Covid-19 - Transport Update

### **Purpose**

1. This paper seeks to update Board on the transport implications of Covid-19 and highlights key issues for consideration as the lockdown is progressively eased.

### **Current Position**

2. Transport represents an integral element of the Board's workplan in recognition of its role in supporting and enabling the functioning of our society and economy. Activity prior to the Covid-19 outbreak focussed on working with Local and Scottish Government partners to develop national transport and active travel policy in the context of the current climate emergency; influencing aspects of transport legislation and facilitating their implementation; seeking to align transport considerations with wider policy aims such as sustainable economic development, regional working and planning reform. This work has been temporarily suspended to allow COSLA to focus on the Covid-19 response. This report provides detail on this response and on the likely next steps as we move into a recovery phase and the lockdown is progressively eased.

### **What is changing?**

#### *The Impact of Covid-19 on Transport*

3. The impact of Covid-19 on the transport system has been unprecedented, with far reaching and long-term implications. The announcement of a lockdown and associated restrictions on all but essential travel on March 23 was immediately followed by a pronounced decrease across all modes of transport. The introduction of social distancing measures on March 26 to limit the spread of the virus affected people, services and businesses, with advice from the Chief Medical Officer for all non-essential business premises, sites, attractions and services to close or be paused unless and until operations could be undertaken safely and in a way that is fully compliant with social distancing. At the time of writing these measures are still fully in place in Scotland, though some of them are expected to be relaxed as per the [framework for decision](#) making published on 21 May by the Scottish Government.
4. Since the beginning of the lockdown demand for public transport has fallen by between 85 and 90 per cent against normal in Scotland. On buses, drivers and customers have also been urged to follow advice provided by the Scottish Government, keeping a reasonable distance where possible, using contactless payment methods and practicing good hygiene to prevent the spread of the virus. On 11 May, the Scottish Government recommended using face coverings in limited circumstances, which included those traveling or working on public transport. Public use of facial coverings is not however currently being made mandatory or being enforced. Providers have also implemented a range of protocols such as enhanced cleaning regimes of vehicles to further enhance workforce and customer protection.
5. The latest available [transport trend data](#) from 11 to 17 May produced by Transport Scotland gives an indication of how travel behaviours are being affected by Covid-19 by comparing journeys taken across main modes against estimations of typical travel patterns

at this time of year. Bus journeys have generally decreased despite a slight increase in concessionary journeys by 10% compared to the lockdown baseline. There has also been an increase of 35% in car journeys, 50% and 30% in cycling and walking journeys respectively. Rail and plane journeys were both down by 50% and 10% respectively. Overall the data shows the extent to which travel behaviours have been affected by Covid-19, with more people choosing to drive, walk and cycle when taking their essential local journeys.

6. Transport Scotland also announced on 22 March that ferry journeys would solely be for island residents, those who have an essential need to travel to or from the mainland and for essential supplies or businesses.

### *Public Transport*

7. Since the start of the crisis, the focus of transport providers has been on guaranteeing a reduced service which still allows freight, key workers and those on essential local journeys to continue to travel. For transport operators this has led to a sudden drop in revenue which has put a number of companies under financial pressure
8. In the specific context of the bus and coach industry, these unprecedented challenges have required both Scottish and Local Government to take steps to offset the impact of reduced demand on services and protect the industry for the future, while also balancing this with the level of service provided and availability of national reliefs and supports (e.g. Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (furlough scheme)). To support Local Authorities in this process, COSLA developed a set of funding assumptions to guide local decisions on the support for providers of both home-to-school transport and other contracted services. The guidance stressed the need for local flexibility to deploy resources and the importance of keeping providers solvent. At a national level, Scottish Government continues to pay National Concessionary Travel Scheme reimbursement against claims and has put in place a temporary Covid-19 support grant for operators. In order to provide flexibility to operators, COSLA also worked in partnership with Association of Transport Co-ordinating Officer (ATCO) and the Traffic Commissioner for Scotland, to put in place a quicker process for agreeing short notice temporary variations to bus services which were directly affected by Covid-19.
9. As Scottish Government begins to frame its national plans for progressive easing of lockdown measures, the financial, social and operational challenges that the bus sector faces will be substantial. It has been widely acknowledged through regular discussions with operators, Transport Scotland, ATCO and the Scottish Traffic Commissioner that public transport provision will not be in a position to “bounce back” to normal. Even as the lockdown is gradually lifted, it is expected that social distancing measures will remain in place for the foreseeable future, which will drastically affect capacity on vehicles as demand is set to rise with some people returning to work and non-essential journeys being allowed again. Estimates provided by operators indicate that capacity will be between 10 and 25 per cent of ‘normal’ with the level of physical distancing required. It is also expected that there will be a degree of reluctance from some members of the public to use public transport as car travel will be perceived by some as safer and more convenient. Guidance on using public transport is expected imminently from Transport Scotland for both operators and passengers.
10. It is widely recognised that with limits being placed on public transport, active travel plays a major part in allowing people to move about both during and after restrictions are eased off. As the Transport Scotland trend data in paragraph 5 shows, walking and cycling has increased during the current lockdown. This is discussed in more depth in the next section of the report.

### *Active Travel Funding (Spaces for People)*

11. On 28 April the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity, Michael Matheson, announced that £10 million of existing active travel funding was to be repurposed to fund temporary projects to encourage safe walking, wheeling and cycling during the current emergency and in the recovery phase. This initiative was called Spaces for People.
  12. The fund is administered by Sustrans on behalf of Transport Scotland. Statutory bodies – including Local Authorities - are allowed to bid for funding for these temporary projects and there is no limit on the amount or number of times that bids can be made. The fund is 100% capital funding unlike other funds that are administered by Sustrans which require match funding from the Local Authority. The fund should be seen as not only a fund to increase access for people who want to use active travel but as a public health and public safety measure. The fund will be meet the needs of people using active travel to meet the social distancing measures that have been introduced during the Covid-19 crisis.
  13. The Spokesperson wrote to the Cabinet Secretary on 30 April 2020 to express concern on the lack of consultation prior to the announcement being made. It was also highlighted that although the aims of the fund were laudable there were concerns about the pressure a bidding process would place on Local Authorities at a time where the focus was dealing with the emergency. Mindful of this concern, Transport Scotland have instructed Sustrans to make the application process as simple as possible. COSLA officers have been in regular dialogue with Sustrans to ascertain whether successful bidders will have to undertake any reporting. As of writing this report this has not be confirmed.
  14. In addition to our representation to the Cabinet Secretary, we are aware of concerns from the Freight Transport Association in relation to the announcement. These include:
    - Any temporary reallocation of road space for walking and cycling can be flexed and changed in a dynamic way to reflect changes in demand and to ensure access for vital logistics services;
    - Kerbside access is maintained at all times for deliveries and servicing, and
    - Local businesses will be consulted but recognising that many will have temporarily closed and therefore may not have the ability to respond.
- These issues have been raised with SCOTS and will be taken into consideration when looking at implementing temporary measures.
15. In recognition of the concerns which arose after the announcement a paper was presented to 15 May 2020 Leaders Meeting. Leaders agreed the recommendation in the paper for COSLA officers to continue to work with Local Authorities and Transport Scotland to establish further details and ensure that the fund meets the needs of Local Authorities.
  16. In line with the position agreed by Leaders, COSLA officers continued to meet Transport Scotland, SCOTS and Sustrans about the operation of the fund. This led us to find out that the Cabinet Secretary was planning to announce on 26 May that the fund would be increased from £10 million to £30 million as a response to the demand for funding received to date by Sustrans.
  17. Reassurance was received from the Cabinet Secretary during a call with the Environment and Economy Spokesperson prior to his announcement that as many local authorities as possible would be enabled to and supported by SUSTRANS to benefit from the Fund where they expressed an interest. Mr Matheson also committed to ongoing discussions with COSLA on the broader active travel funding agenda and to address the body of

concern within Local Government over aspects of the current funding arrangements. A full outline of the discussion was provided in a paper to COSLA Leaders on 29 May.

18. As of writing this report, 10 Local Authorities have received funding from Sustrans, a total of 27 Local Authorities have registered interest on the Fund's portal, and multiple applications are either being worked on or being assessed.
19. COSLA continues to work with Sustrans, Transport Scotland and SCOTS to facilitate even uptake of funding at a local level as well as help identify and where possible resolve issues emerging on the Fund.

### *The Future*

20. While there are many unknowns and questions over how COVID19 will impact the future of our transport and road networks, there are immediate clear challenges and priorities faced by Local Government – an initial overview of these is provided below and it is likely that further areas of focus will emerge over the coming weeks in consultation with different professional groups as well as feedback from the Board when this report is considered:

- Public transport operators' capacity to deliver services following the drastic reduction in revenue caused by Covid-19 and councils' ability to financially backfill any subsidised services which could be either handed back or reduced in the long term;
- Similarly to the economy, there is a clear risk that a reduction in the commercial market could disproportionately affect those who rely exclusively on public transport for access to shops, work and essential services. This is particularly the case for remote communities which already suffer from poorer transport links;
- Resource implications and feasibility of adapting local transport provision to social distancing measures for both school transport and other contracted services;
- Clear messaging is required at both national and local level to anticipate potential uncertainty around use of public transport following easing of lockdown;
- Need for regular monitoring and joint working between Scottish and Local Government to ensure transport requirements are considered during policy making. This will particularly be the case over the coming weeks and months as national sectoral guidance is produced and regularly reviewed by the Scottish Government in line with public health advice;
- There will also be a need for a phased reintroduction of previously relaxed traffic/parking management and enforcement in anticipation of the return to work and school for many over the coming days and weeks. [Guidance](#) issued jointly by the British Parking Association and COSLA currently recommends that any enforcement activity focuses on incidents of obstructive or dangerous parking that could have a more significant impact on road safety and access for emergency and essential services, and
- Information provided by SCOTS shows that the current focus within roads authorities is generally on road maintenance operations considered to be safety critical during the current Covid-19 emergency as per Scottish Government guidance, with many staff either on stand-by or redeployed to other services such as waste. As restrictions begin to be eased, a phased workforce return will be necessary to address the backlog of repairs and other essential works that have been temporarily paused.

21. As the Scottish Government launched its [route map](#) through and out of the crisis on 21 May, general consensus is that transport represents a substantial element of the nation's transition out of lockdown. During his statement to the Scottish Parliament on Tuesday 26 May, the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity launched the

[Transport Transition Plan](#) which seeks to:

- provide guidance to support the easing of restrictions on everyday life and movement
- support economic recovery within the transport sector and broader economy, and
- develop the future of transport in Scotland

22. The plan will constantly evolve to mirror the different stages of transition out of the current lockdown and the different transport requirements which will apply at each stage. COSLA has been invited to feed into this work and we will report back to the Board as more detail becomes available on the Plan.

### **Proposed COSLA position**

23. In order to inform our contribution to the national recovery response as well as steer the general direction of our work going forward on the priorities identified at paragraph 20, a set of high-level principles are set out below for input and endorsement by the Board:

- We must be mindful of avoiding a one-size-fits all approach to recovery thinking as challenges and experiences will differ drastically across the country and where appropriate we should stress the need for local responses to local issues in national guidance;
- Public transport provision will be critical to keep our communities connected with jobs, homes, services and schools. It is paramount for Local Government to be in a position to guarantee an acceptable level of service going forward, while taking steps to safeguard the safety of both passengers, staff and pupils going back to school. When thinking about public transport provision post-Covid we have to ensure that those who are vulnerable or live in disadvantaged communities are not disproportionately affected;
- We need to continue drawing from Local Government professional expertise to gauge the implications on resource and capacity of the Local Government transport response to Covid-19, to inform discussions with Scottish Government and recovery work being undertaken at a national level;
- We should also not lose sight of our duty to deliver on climate change commitments and the role that transport plays in the transition to a net-zero society and economy as agreed previously by this Board. We should look for ways to lock in the active travel “gains” made in this period for the longer term in line with the sustainable travel hierarchy, which discourages individual car journeys. This is a critical window of opportunity to encourage and support active travel modes where these are appropriate and practical with the potential to shape a longer-term modal shift, and
- As the Climate Change Committee emphasises in their [letter](#) to the Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform, we have an opportunity to embed new social norms, especially for travel, that benefit well-being, improve productivity and reduce emissions. While strengthening the roads network might play a role in the recovery from Covid-19, continued investment in resilient digital technology as well as scaling up low-carbon supply chains (electric vehicles and charging infrastructure) will certainly be required.

### **Next Steps**

24. The immediate next steps will be to begin engagement on the development of the aforementioned Transport Transition Plan at a national level, as well as feed into the internal work being carried out by the COSLA Special Interest Group considering recovery.

25. Regular engagement with Transport Scotland and Local Government professional associations will also continue with a focus on local and school transport provision, Local Government preparedness to enable social distancing on and off vehicles, as well as monitoring of delivery of the Spaces for People Fund. We also expect to work with SCOTS and the British Parking Association on revised parking operational guidance for Local Authorities and the Traffic Commissioner for Scotland to inform the upcoming review of the temporary registration process in partnership with ATCO.

**May 2020**