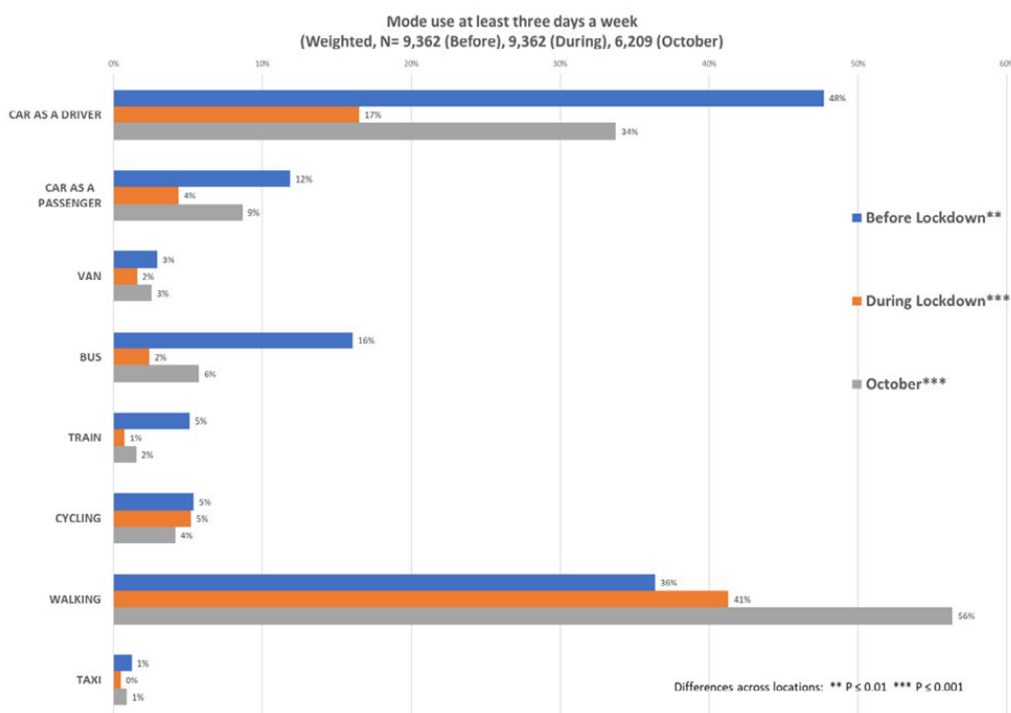


# A walk in the park: has the Covid-19 travel response opened the door to a new direction on climate policy?

New research (1) led by Professors Greg Marsden and Jillian Anable from Leeds Institute for Transport Studies explores how people in England and Scotland changed travel behaviour as a result of the pandemic.

The new data, from a large panel based survey, confirm that people have walked and cycled more, and worked and shopped more online than ever before. Car use has not fully recovered and car sales are down, despite very low public transport use. The researchers make the point that the shifts to active travel (walking and cycling) could be consolidated and extended to meet the UK's net-zero carbon goals. They recommend that the Governments' investment plans should be altered to focus on creating high-quality neighbourhoods where people can walk and cycle to work, shops and services, and safe routes to schools and town and city centres.

Walking – the cheapest and easiest transport option for many – has been a big winner. Of those surveyed, there was an increase from 36% of people walking at least three days a week before the first lockdown to 56% of people walking at least three days a week by October 2020. This massive shift has been hidden in plain sight because walking is so often ignored in what gets counted. Survey results are shown below.



It was assumed that the switch away from public transport would mean everyone turned to the car. However, working from home increased fourfold in our survey to an average of more than two days a week across all workers. This has reduced some car use. New car sales fell 35% during the past year and traffic was, on average, 30% down on 2019.

Dr Greg Marsden, who led the research, said:

“It would be a huge mistake to try and go back to the overcrowded, polluted and congested transport system we had before the pandemic. Our work shows people have been much more active during the pandemic, particularly walking. We need to go even further and faster in our efforts to create really walkable and cyclable environments and better neighbourhoods if we are to maintain what has been one of the few positives to result from the pandemic. It will have huge health benefits. Building back better needs to be building back differently.

To make this happen we also need to keep down the levels of traffic on the road. People have not gone back to car yet in a big way and we can take actions to keep that down. If everyone who has been working from home during the pandemic did so for 2 days a week that would take 14% of peak period car trips off the roads, equivalent to a school half term. We can channel the money that might have been set aside for new roads to pay for a better, more local and more liveable transport system that works for everyone.”

(1) [‘Marsden, G., Anable, J., Docherty, I., Brown, L. 2021. At a crossroads: Travel adaptations during Covid-19 restrictions and where next?’](#) is a briefing for policymakers from the Centre for Research into Energy Demand Solutions (CREDS) and DecarboN8.

CREDS (Centre for Research into Energy Demand Solutions) was established as part of the [UK Research and Innovation’s Energy Programme](#) in April 2018, with funding of £19.5M over five years. Its mission is to make the UK a leader in understanding the changes in energy demand needed for the transition to a secure and affordable, low carbon energy system.

[DecarboN8](#) is an EPSRC-funded network to bring together business, government and academia across the North of England. It aims to trial and accelerate the adoption of low carbon transport solutions.

[Dr Greg Marsden](#) is Professor of Transport Governance at the Institute for Transport Studies at the University of Leeds.