

Coronavirus: implications for transport – Call for Evidence

Summary

The Transport Planning Society (TPS) is the leading professional body for transport planners and has a continuing interest in all transport matters. We are a society to facilitate, develop and promote best practice in transport planning and provide a focus for dialogue between all those engaged in it, whatever their background or other professional affiliation.

The events of 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic is having an unprecedented impact on how we get around, how goods are transported, and how transport planners do their work and so we feel fully qualified to provide evidence to the select committee on behalf of our membership, which in turn represents professionals working in the transport field.

Our evidence is based around the effect on transport – ‘key’ we fell to the recovery and on our industry as professionals working within this field.

In April 2020 at the height of the national lockdown, the Directors of the TPS recognised the need to look into the effects of the pandemic on the industry as a whole and set up a project to allow transport planners to share their stories, thoughts, and feelings about transport planning and its future in this uncertain time.

The results of that project form the basis of this evidence.

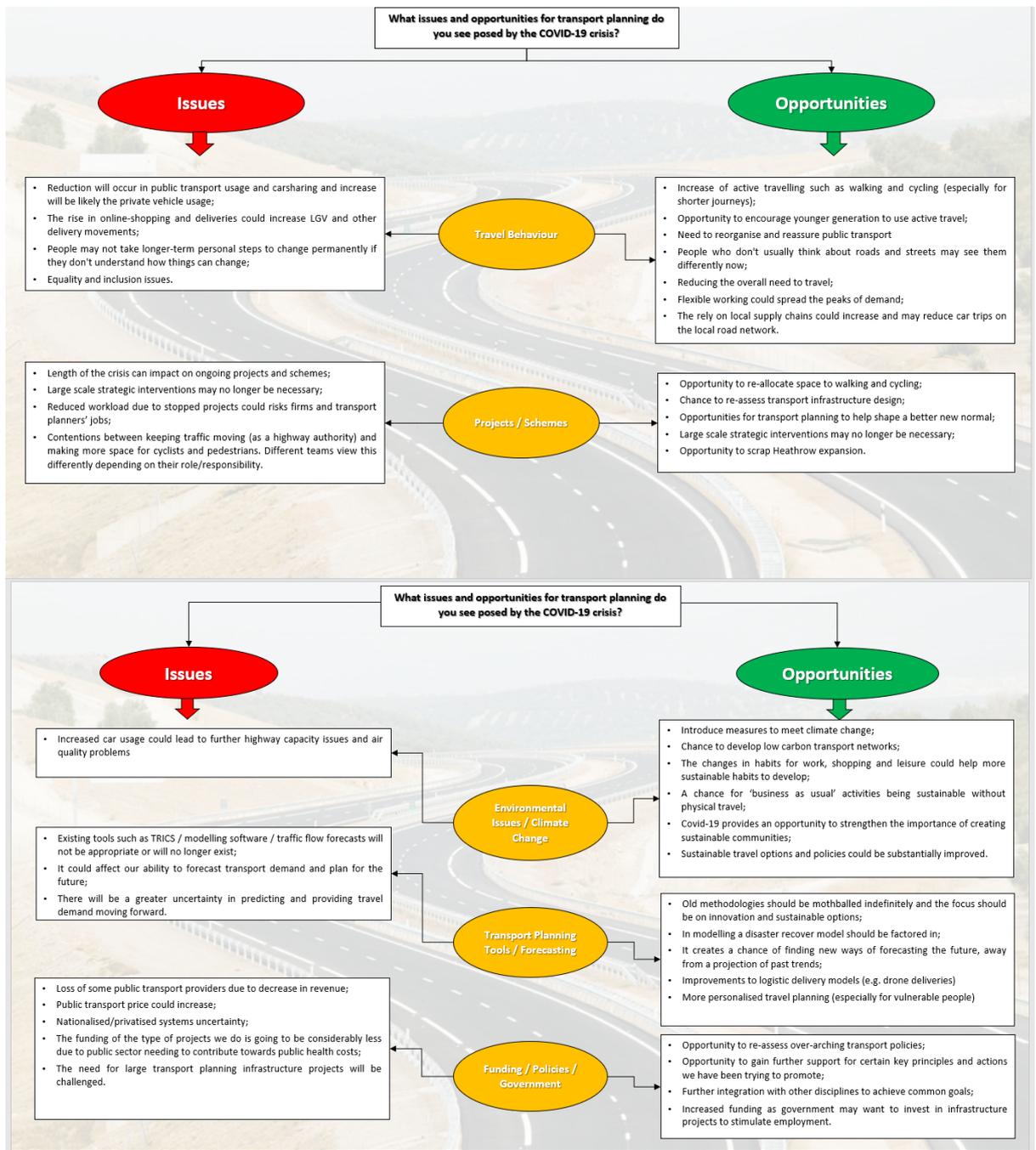
Our evidence is based around the effect on transport – ‘key’ we fell to the recovery and on our industry as professionals working within this field.

We asked our members and supporters to answer the following questions:

- **How are you feeling about transport planning right now?**
- **What issues and opportunities for transport planning do you see posed by the COVID-19 crisis?**
- **How do you feel about the future of transport planning and why?**
- **What should transport planners and the TPS be doing about this?**

The responses to each of the questions are illustrated below:

1. How are you feeling about transport planning right now?



Respondents feel both uncertain and positive about transport planning right now. One of the respondents described the current situation as *'no better nor more difficult time to plan for the future'*.

Respondents focused mainly on the issues and opportunities around travel behaviour, the future of major projects and schemes and the funding for them. They also point out some environmental issues and opportunities due to COVID-19, and also mentioned what could happen with different transport planning tools we rely on as part of delivering transport projects.

Most of the respondents share the same point of view that a reduction will occur in public transport and an increase will be noticeable in public car usage especially for the short – medium term.

The majority of respondents believe that walking and cycling will likely to increase especially for shorter journeys.

4. What should transport planners and the TPS be doing about this?

- Support - members, the environmental agenda, innovative working,
- Lobbying government to effect change,
- Engaging & debating with each other and other institutions over post COVID-19 scenarios
- Leading – e.g. cross disciplinary consensus building
- Documenting impact,
- Facilitate sharing of info. and data,
- Address issues at Transport Practitioners conference via themed workshops,
- Setting the vision for the country & industry,
- Research- particularly influencing research into transport behaviour change
- Collectively working with DfT, CLG & Local Authorities,
- Proactively influence govt. policy & actions
- Support more digital settings
- Make our voice heard
- Development of skills – fewer engineers- more behaviour change experts, Think & plan smarter
- Advocate & not compete with other non-car transport
- Provide public response to social distancing (SD) issues around Public Transport
- Position TPS as essential profession to deal with current crisis
- Design to ensure a measure of social distancing

Further a number of our members and supporters produced blogs on this topic which can be found at on the Transport Planning Society website at <https://tps.org.uk/tp-day-2020-announced/read-our-blogs>

[The Transport Planning Society firmly believes that transport and the professionals who work in this field are key to a sustainable and safe recovery following the pandemic. We would like to offer our full support for all measures that encourage people to travel more sustainably but we would like to emphasis the need for long-term capital and revenue support for these, in order to ensure that measures are planned, designed and delivered to the highest possible standard and are as accessible to as many people as possible.](#)

Joanna Ward – Board Director Transport Planning Society Sept 2020

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Main Report

Transport Planning and the COVID-19 pandemic

“Nothing in life is to be feared: it is only to be understood. Now is the time to understand more, so we fear less.”

Marie Curie

During 2020, transport faced a challenge unforeseen in its scale and impacts, and one inconceivable as the year started. The onset of the coronavirus (COVID-19) global pandemic resulted in drastic changes in lifestyles, attitudes, economies, and how we get around. As lockdowns of people were introduced around the world, and eventually eased, there were dramatic shifts in behaviour. Shifts that we are only just beginning to understand the implications of.

The Transport Planning Society undertook a project to document the changes that have taken place in transport during one of the most turbulent times that it has ever faced. We particularly wanted to understand the impact on transport planners as professionals, focussing on 4 key questions:

1. How do you feel right now?
2. What issues and opportunities for transport planning do you see posed by the COVID-19 crisis?
3. How do you feel about the future of transport planning and why?
4. What should transport planners and the TPS be doing about this?

This paper is that story, distilled.

How did we change how we got around?

This is the question that we always ask ourselves as transport planners. And the answer is, how we got around changed dramatically. To give a few highlights:



On 29th March, the number of cars on UK roads was **23%** of its usual level, and was the same on 13th April (the Spring Bank Holiday)



The use of bicycles soared to **384%** of its normal level over the May Bank Holiday weekend, and even now is still above its normal levels of use.



The use of public transport significantly declined, and remains low. At one point, the use of London Underground was at **4%** of its usual use.

The rail network also reached such a low. Even now, the best performing public transport modes – buses – are running at **59%** of normal use.



Freight, often thought of as some of the heroes of the lockdown, went as low as **29%** of capacity for light goods vehicles, and **33%** of usual capacity for heavy goods vehicles.

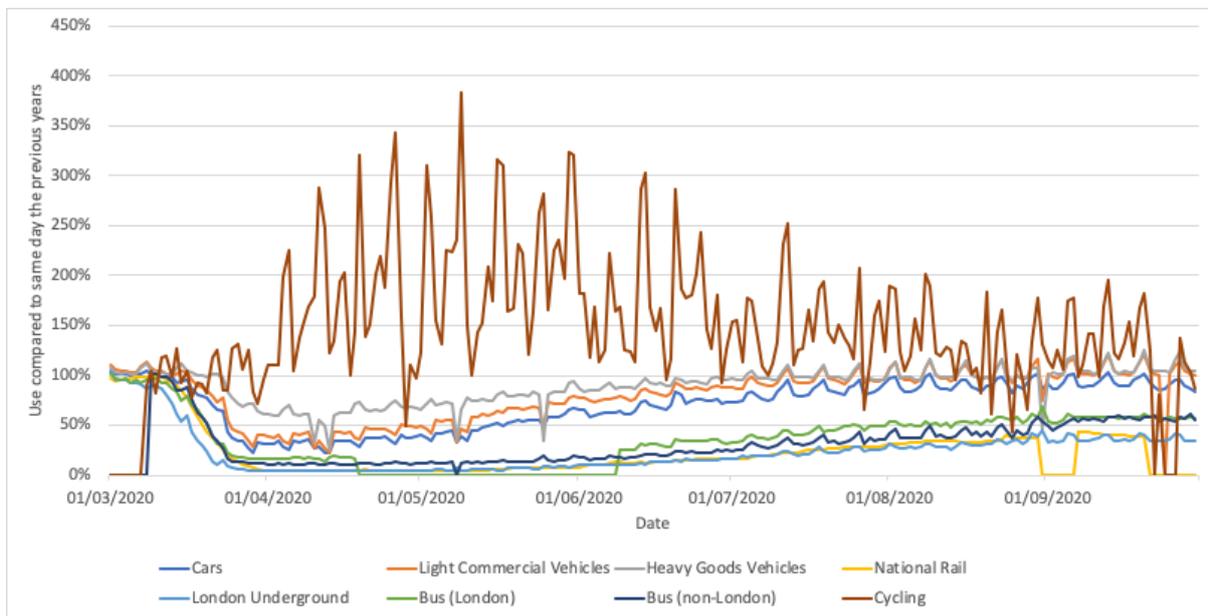


Figure 1 – The use of different modes of transport during the COVID-19 pandemic¹

The result in terms of initiatives and work done was huge. Below is a summary of the list that we as a group managed to note. It is by no means comprehensive and it only covers the UK, and we found several resources online that detail initiatives and schemes that are being delivered.

Month	Announcement
March	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government announces option for rail companies to move to temporary emergency contract measures
April	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government announces funding to keep buses running during lockdown Emergency funding for transport links to the Isle of Wight and Isles of Scilly announced £17 million to safeguard freight routes to Northern Ireland announced
May	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> £2bn in funding is announced by the government for walking and cycling improvements, including the Emergency Active Travel Fund £1.7bn Transport Infrastructure Investment Fund announced Rules on pubs and restaurants serving outdoors are relaxed Extraordinary funding for Transport for London announced

¹ Department for Transport (2020) Transport use during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Date site accessed: 11/10/2020. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/transport-use-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic>

June	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ UK government announces plans to legalise shared e-scooter trials ▪ Face coverings become mandatory on public transport ▪ UK's first shared e-scooter trial announced for the Tees Valley and Darlington
July	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Travel corridors for safe travel from identified countries announced ▪ New Local Transport Note (LTN 01/20 – Cycle Infrastructure Design) announced ▪ New Northern Transport Acceleration Taskforce announced

How did this affect transport planners?

To understand the impacts of this on transport planners, a small group of committed transport planners got together and simply asked them. And we asked them in a number of creative ways:

- We set up and ran a survey asking these 4 questions, and shared this on social media and through the TPS newsletter;
- We had a number of guest blogs on the TPS blog;
- We ran a virtual social event and simply asked those who attended those same questions, and discussed what it meant for transport planners;
- We kept a log (as best we could) of different policy initiatives delivered during the pandemic;
- We asked these questions whenever we spoke to other transport planners.

The answers that we found were as wide-ranging and significant as the pandemic itself.

How were transport planners feeling?

They were feeling a lot of things, it is fair to say. When asked, transport planners often first highlighted how the COVID-19 pandemic would affect transport, and how they felt about that. Here, the thoughts were very mixed.

“Town centres will have to be re-thought if one of the lasting effects is less people commuting.”

“Public transport will no longer be viable if the long term impacts of social distancing are even minor.”

“One of the few clear messages that we have had during the pandemic is not to use public transport. I think that this will stick permanently.”

“Did you see that video of all of the cyclists on Parliament Square at (May Bank Holiday) weekend? Wow! That is what we should aim for.”

But when probed, what was revealed was that transport planners also felt a deep sense of personal unease about the situation.

“Having Teams meetings was fun at first. Now I just want to see my work friends again. I even miss my crowded train into Manchester.”

“I have been furloughed. Whilst I love the extra time for hobbies, what will happen when it runs out? I may be out of a job.”

“It’s frustrating. We keep getting told that there isn’t enough work and we could make cuts, but I know that other teams are working 50 hours a week on projects.”

“I’m really struggling mentally. I am working all hours, in a small flat. I can’t get away from it and I am starting to hate my work.”

What emerged from our work was that transport planners felt that the industry is at a defining moment. To some that is exciting. It offers the opportunity to remake the future of transport in the UK, and for transport planners to have a stronger voice. Particularly when it comes to pushing for solutions that before the pandemic were deemed impossible to do.

But that future is also a daunting one for many. Especially when the immediate future involves losing your job, not seeing friends and family, or working every hour of the day. This future also gives the possibility that what emerges from the pandemic is either no change or change for the worse.

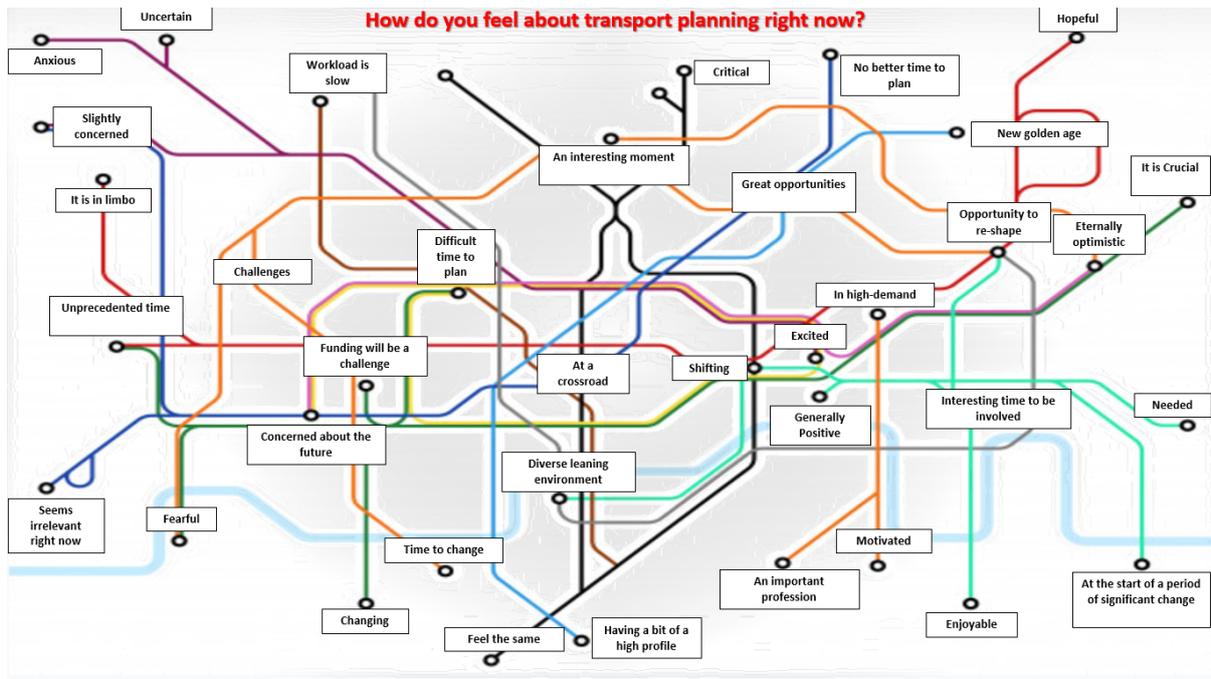
Perhaps one respondent to our survey put it the best:

“There is no better nor more difficult time to plan for the future.”

The issues and opportunities of COVID-19

When we asked transport planners how they felt about transport planning during COVID-19, there was a huge diversity of opinion. What became clear to us is that transport planners were feeling a huge variety of things, at exactly the same time. But what was more interesting was how all of these different perspectives were linked to one another.

Take, for example, feelings of excitement and positivity. Our analysis of the responses to the survey indicated that that this aligned closely with feelings of being needed, the opportunity to re-shape transport planning and how things are done, and being at the start of a period of significant change. But it is also aligned to it being difficult to plan, which in turn is aligned to concerns about the future.



Complex? That is because it is.

This complexity also found its way into every aspect of transport planners' work.



Transport planners raised a significant concern that in the short to medium term, people would be driving more. This is because without significant policy intervention, people will avoid the use of public transport.



Transport planners are also buoyant about the immediate future for walking and cycling. Having seen somewhat of a boom in both during lockdown, and the announcement of the Emergency Active Travel Fund, some behaviours could be locked in permanently.



Deliveries were also on the mind of transport planners. Many welcomed the recognition of the importance of freight and delivery traffic. But this is tempered by the additional number of delivery vehicles on the roads.



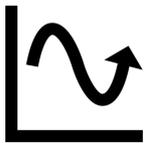
As social distancing rules and government guidance on avoiding the use of public transport continues to bite, many transport planners were concerned that it would be a long time before people trust public transport again. And immediate assistance to maintain services is necessary.



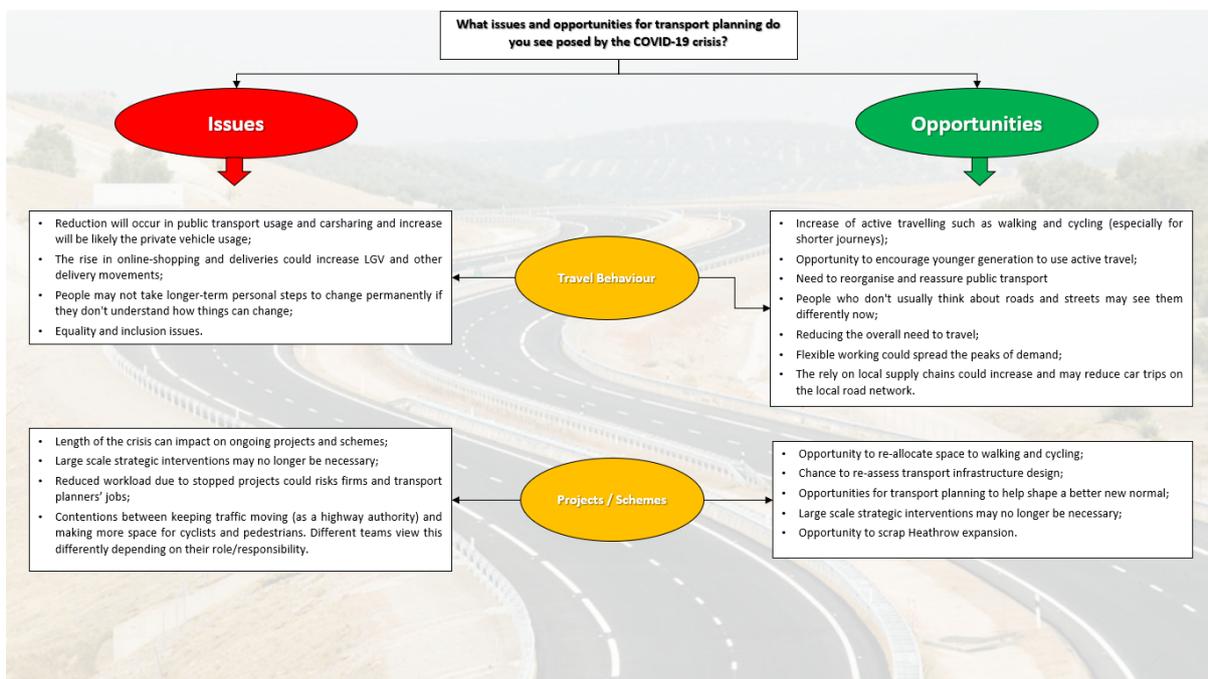
For new infrastructure schemes, the immediate practical issue was delivery of them. But at the same time, transport planners told us how they were able to help deliver active travel schemes, e-scooter pilots, and Nightingale Hospitals at a break-neck pace.

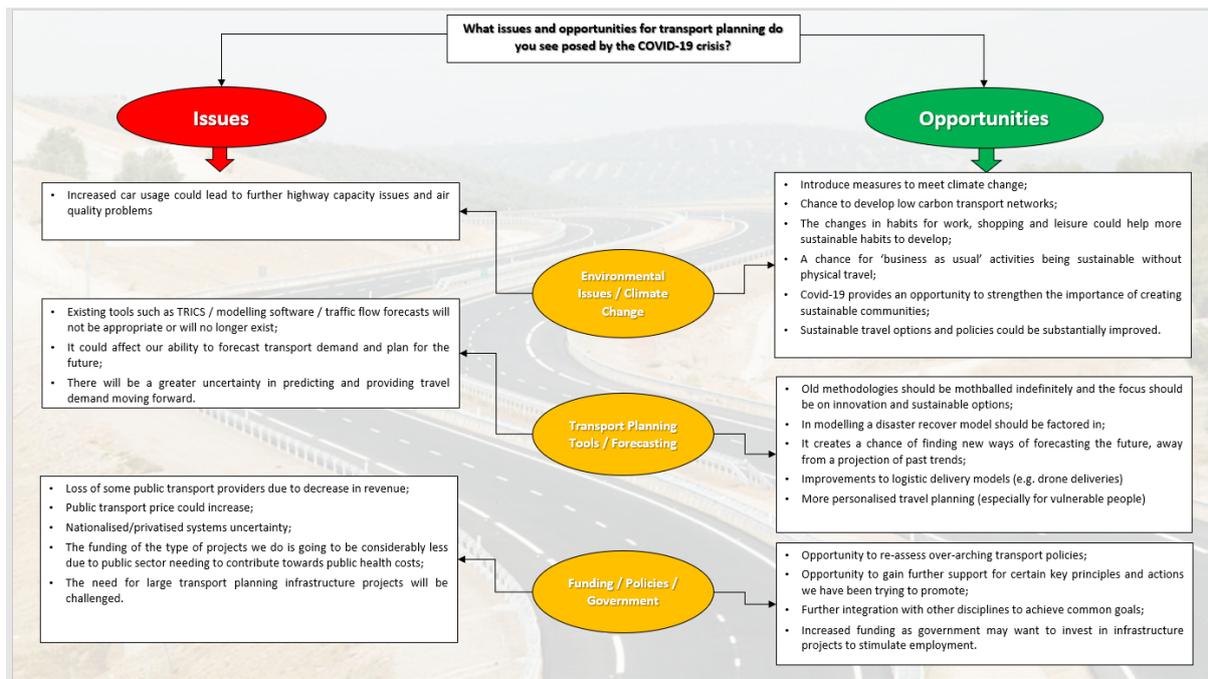


Transport planners also told us how they were thinking about the future differently and what policies are needed for those futures. Many authorities, such as the North East Combined Authority and Nottingham City Council, were delivering scenario planning work during the pandemic to explore different post-pandemic futures.



There was an overwhelming feeling that existing transport planning tools are not fit for the job of understanding what comes after the pandemic (partly because they have never had to do this before). As such, there is a big opportunity to either repurpose them, or scrap them completely.





How do transport planners feel about the future of transport planning and why?

An overwhelming message came back throughout all of our conversations, and was put so ably by one of the respondents to our survey:

“Transport planning will not get a chance to seize hold of the future of transport in the UK. It must take it.”

This is reflected in the work that transport planners have undertaken during the pandemic. But underneath this overwhelming desire is a complexity of feeling about what the future holds.

Over the next year, transport planners are worried. With a recession and there being talk of a second wave of infections in the winter months, the profession is braced for further job losses and movement restrictions. This will affect transport planners on a very personal level.

“We have been told we will not be going back to the office until the New Year. I don’t think i can stand another 8 months of Zoom calls.”

“I lost my last job during the financial crisis. I expect I will lose my current one this time around.”

“All of the graduates have been furloughed. We might lose our jobs before we have started our careers.”

“Nobody talks about the huge personal strain lockdown is putting on everyone. It was fun and interesting for a few weeks. But we cannot get away from it. It is so hard to remain positive when everything in life changing is such a huge emotional burden.”

Within this context, transport planners spoke about the need to plant the seeds of change now, and towards a future where transport is greener and more sustainable than it is currently. As well as having a focus on making the places where we live, work, and enjoy leisure time better.

“I’ve seen people talk about huge, immediate, and lasting change. They are fooling themselves. Change never happens like that. I have seen people quote the London Olympics as an example. The Olympics didn’t change how people travelled fundamentally, apart from in areas where big, permanent infrastructure changes were made.”

“The money for active travel will have no impact significant impact immediately. What is more important is what comes next.”

“All of the graduates have been furloughed. We might lose our jobs before we have started our careers.”

“I fear we will focus on short term problem solving, and not on the long term change that is needed. Building roads may create jobs and get you to the next election, but does nothing for the longer term.”

Underpinning this was a fear that decision makers would panic during this pandemic. They would try and go back to normal and how things were, and make poor decisions now that will have long term ramifications.

Looking further ahead, transport planners are more optimistic in their outlook. Provided that the seeds of a sustainable future based on liveable places and cities were planted now, there is no reason why transport planning can be a force for good in the future. But the big question was posed by an attendee of our TPS Social event:

“What happens when real life kicks back in?”

Transport planners have noted the overwhelming political messaging to get back to normal as soon as possible – to go to work, to go shopping, to and enjoy time with friends and family – even while the pandemic is still happening. But on the above question, transport planners didn’t really have an answer. Although they had plenty of ideas of what the future could hold.

“We need to collect a lot of data on this period, so that we can use it to inform decisions.”

“Build Back Better? How about Build Back Greener? Scrap all road building. Invest the saved money in better broadband and local walking and cycling infrastructure.”

“The old model of public transport is broken. It must be demand responsive in the future.”

“Dare i mention nationalisation?”

“I think that tools like SATURN and Paramics may have had their day. We are now looking to use agent-based modelling for our next modelling suite to inform the local plan.”

“We need to push for a positive change. The old life was bad for us and our planet. As bad as lockdown was there were some good bits like less traffic.”

An interesting observation from the discussions is that there is a feeling that transport planners realised the understated appreciation for the transport profession. In lockdown, this manifested itself as appreciation for transport workers who kept supply chains running, or support on social media for temporary infrastructure changes and new hospitals.

A final reflection on this is that there is the feeling that the future of transport in a post-pandemic world is very much up for grabs, and is for the industry itself to define. Old assumptions about what is and isn't possible have been disrupted, and that makes this a good a time as any to change how the future pans out.

Conclusions

The work which we did was only a snapshot of the attitudes of transport planners to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is easy – and in some cases justified – to be worried about what the future could hold. And that certainly came across clearly in our research.

But what also came across clearly was the sense that this is transport planning's time to shine. COVID-19 has presented a huge opportunity for transport planning to assert itself, and to push for policies and changes that really will build back better.

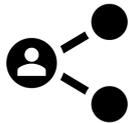
What this means in practice for how transport planners do their work, and how the Transport Planning Society leads the profession are quite different things. For transport planners themselves, the overwhelming messages from other transport planners are to:



Set the vision for the nation. This is the perfect opportunity for transport planners to assert a sustainable, just, and inclusive transport system. Decision-makers minds have been opened to the possibility of what can be achieved in a time of radical change. This does not mean that transport planning must act in haste, but that it has an opportunity right now that it may not get again in the future. It is up to every transport planner to seize that opportunity and deliver it in their work.



Lead in building cross-industry consensus. Transport planners have had the opportunity to work closely with sectors such as public health, community groups, and economic development to deliver projects that react to the immediate issues posed by COVID-19. They need to build upon those connections to add value to their projects in the future, but also to understand the wider impact of transport initiatives, and capture value that is otherwise missed.



Share data and best practice as a matter of course. The impacts of COVID-19 are uncertain, with some areas better at understanding the impacts than others. If better policies and schemes are to be developed, transport planners themselves need to be sharing their data and sharing their practice as a default operational setting. And not just when it is asked for.

Many of these actions can also be taken by the Transport Planning Society itself. However, our work revealed that it is better for the TPS to act as an enabler for transport planners, and empower them to deliver all of the above. It can do this by doing the following:



Providing a support structure for transport planners. Immediately, transport planners face an uncertain future. The prospect of a global recession can mean challenging times financially, whilst the emotional toll of lockdown and ongoing movement restrictions is having a toll on their mental wellbeing. TPS already helps by linking to job vacancies on its website. But it needs to be creative and sensitive in helping its members through what is an emotionally challenging time. This could be by way of support groups for job seekers, or linking with mental health charities.



Documenting the impact of COVID-19 and using that evidence to push for radical change. Plenty of organisations are already collecting evidence on the impact of COVID-19. This needs co-ordinating into a single resource that not only documents what is happening and its impacts, but answers a key question – so what? The impacts of these actions need to translate into policy changes at local and national level. The TPS can enable this to happen.



Leading the debate on what the New Normal looks like for transport planning. The TPS is well known for its thought-provoking events and debates. Transport planners are expecting it to take a leading role in debating what the new future could actually look like, and to challenge assumptions on policy making and action. And taking that debate to decision makers who are often not part of this discussion with proposals for changes.