

Building back better on urban transport

As the network of transport authorities serving the largest city regions in England, we worked together to keep the wheels of public transport turning during the lockdown so that key workers could get to where they needed to be. With the release from national lockdown we have ramped up public transport, and prioritised cycling and walking, to support a green and just recovery. In this paper we set out how, with the right policy framework from Government, we can meet that challenge.

1. The challenges city regions face

The COVID-19 pandemic

The necessity of a lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic plunged the UK into a recession whilst potentially triggering or accelerating longer term structural changes in the economy and in the ways and places in which people work. It has also led to a dramatic reduction in public transport use during the lockdown, and a much slower return to buses, trams and trains than to the car since the emergence from lockdown.

Government messaging on avoiding public transport during the lockdown proved effective and has been a factor in what has been a car-led recovery in travel since the lockdown was eased. With revenue from fares decimated, public transport has needed life support in the form of emergency funding packages from Government to keep the wheels turning. However, the short term nature of these funding packages makes long term planning challenging. There is a fear that if additional funding support is withdrawn whilst patronage is still depressed, then cut backs will be inevitable. Patronage is likely to be low for some time given the impacts of a recession, for some time given more home working and less office working, and the recent shift to the car. The shock of the pandemic also takes place against the backdrop of the steady decline in bus use which was happening prior to this crisis.

A green and just recovery from the pandemic will not be possible without public transport. The pandemic has brought home how reliant we are as a society on those essential workers who do not have access

to a car and need public transport to get to work. Cutting public transport would mean cutting the jobs of those that work on public transport at a time when unemployment is already on the rise. It also risks severing those areas where unemployment is high from those areas where jobs are available. In addition, a car-led recovery would also lead to urban centres being throttled by traffic congestion.

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The climate imperative

Climate change is happening now and the more extreme weather conditions it brings are already impacting on our urban areas, including greater propensity for flooding. Transport is the largest source of UK greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and a sector of the economy where progress on reducing emissions has been poor. As the Government's own Transport Decarbonisation Plan says: *'The scale of the challenge demands a step change in both the breadth and scale of ambition and we have a duty to act quickly and decisively to reduce emissions.'* The Government has also said that as part of its plan for achieving this: *'Public transport and active travel will be the natural first choice for our daily activities. We will use our cars less and be able to rely on a convenient, cost-effective and coherent public transport network.'*

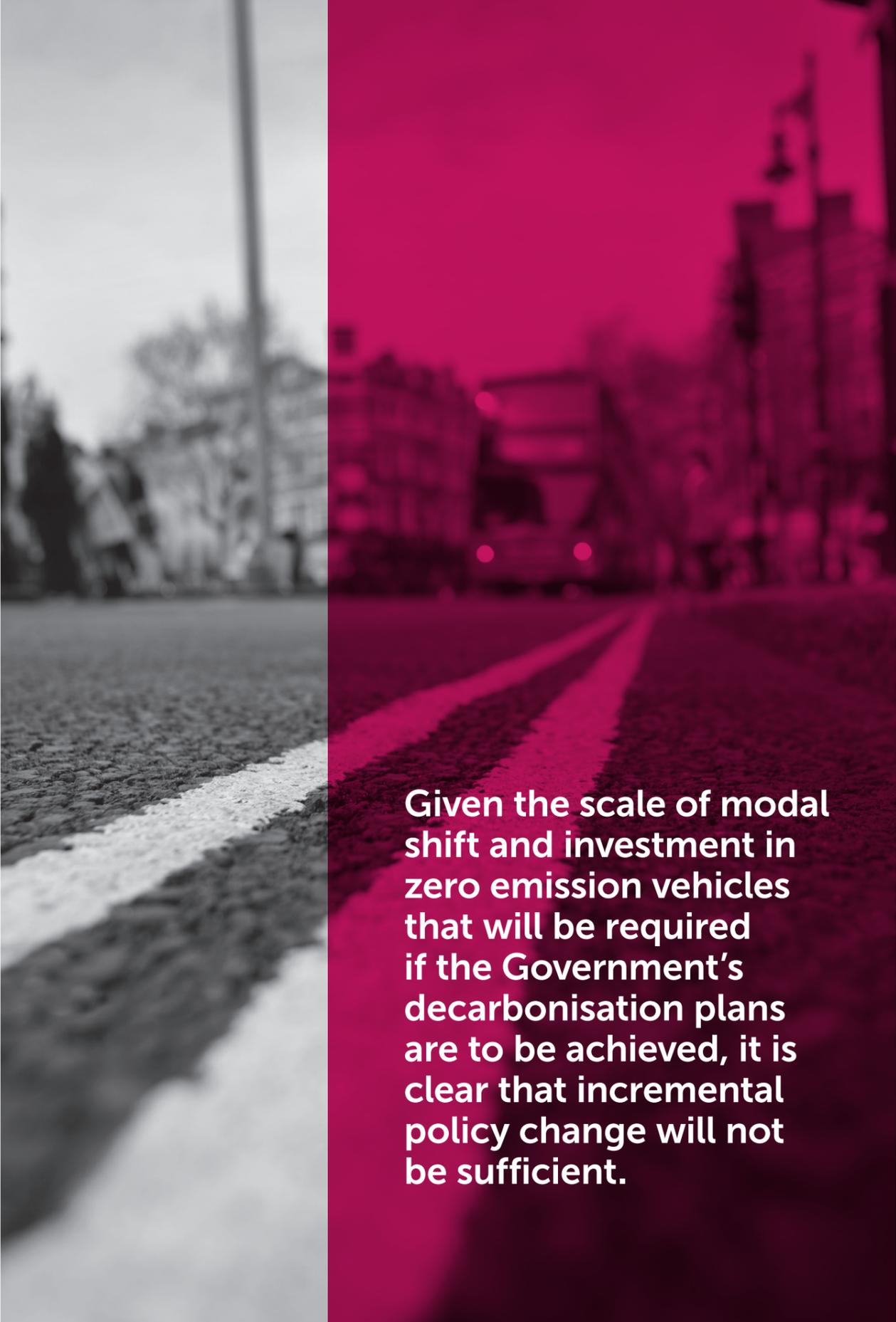
These ambitions are welcome. However, we start from a challenging position:

- public transport's share of trips made is low - outside of commuting into some of the larger urban centres. Bus use and bus networks have also been in general year-on-year decline
- cycling levels remain low in general, at about 2% of trips in 2019
- the car continues to dominate trip share (61% of trips in 2019) with many urban geographies and local economies (outside of the largest city centres) having been redesigned in a car dependent way in recent decades
- significant investment in all vehicle fleets (and the infrastructure for the supply of decarbonised electricity and other fuel sources) will be required if urban vehicle fleets are to be decarbonised.

- the fiscal and taxation framework for transport does not always favour or promote low carbon choices

Given this starting point, and the scale of modal shift and investment in zero emission vehicles that will be required if the Government's decarbonisation plans are to be achieved, it is clear that incremental policy change will not be sufficient. Instead there will need to be significant long term capital investment and revenue support for public transport as well as for measures which support greater take up of active travel.

In addition, much of our transport infrastructure was not designed for the more extreme weather conditions we are now experiencing and will experience more often in coming years. Without further investment in enhancing the resilience of our transport networks, we face higher levels of disruption and higher levels of risk to those who use and work on it.



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2. What building back better means for urban transport

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic presents both challenges and opportunities: the challenge of a car-led recovery, but also the opportunity to build back better from the crisis, moving at a pace and scale commensurate with the necessity of a green economic recovery and with the experience of how quickly radical policies were put in place during the pandemic.

If the right policy choices are made now, we can transition to decarbonised urban transport provision which will support the aspirations of our city regions to become happier, healthier, greener, fairer and more prosperous places.

The right transport policies can do this by:

- accelerating the decarbonisation of urban transport (and thus for urban areas as a whole) through encouraging modal shift to lower or zero carbon modes and through the decarbonisation of urban vehicle fleets
- improving the resilience of our urban areas by making urban transport systems better able to cope with the more extreme weather conditions that are already occurring as a result of climate change
- creating good jobs directly in the provision of enhanced public transport networks, through investment in cleaner and greener vehicle technologies and through transport's wider role in underpinning urban economies
- supporting the 'levelling up' agenda by ensuring good connectivity within and between metro areas
- making better places (where people want to live, visit and invest in) through supporting the transformation of the urban realm

What this would look like in practice is:

- rail, light rail and prioritised bus networks that provide rapid, reliable and high capacity access into and between urban centres
- a big increase in the number of shorter journeys made by bike or on foot through measures like high quality cycling routes and low traffic neighbourhoods
- public transport fares that are simple and affordable
- a public transport network that is accessible and open to all through providing good network coverage across city regions with modern accessible vehicles
- green and smart logistics with more freight transported by rail and water for long haul, and by cargo bike and low impact vans for the last mile
- decarbonised vehicle fleets, from taxis to trains and from buses to bin lorries
- transport systems that are keeping pace with the application of new technologies and the introduction of new business models - from micro-mobility to vehicles that are better connected and more autonomous

3. Empowering transport authorities to deliver

Properly empowered and funded city region transport authorities will be needed in order to support a just and green recovery from COVID-19.

Fully empowered and funded transport authorities will be critical because they can:

- organise road space in a way which facilitates and encourages active travel and public transport, and discourages more carbon intensive modes
- support, promote and invest in public transport so that it provides an effective alternative to car use
- invest in the decarbonisation of bus fleets
- work with District Councils and the power sector to ensure that electricity, hydrogen and biogas is available to power low or zero emission vehicle fleets
- coordinate with wider economic and housing plans to ensure that existing and new developments are easily accessible on foot, by bike and by public transport.¹
- collaborate with the wider local public sector - including education, local government, health and social care - on the transport implications of their policies and decisions.²
- promote the transition to decarbonised urban transport through, travel demand management programmes, outreach and their network of contacts with local businesses, the wider local public sector and local communities
- make wider connections between the decarbonisation of transport, energy and the built environment at the local level. For example, through a coordinated approach to investment in vehicle fleets, local renewable power generation, public buildings, and housing and local grid infrastructure.³
- support place-based solutions by taking a view across conurbations of the different types of policies which will be most effective across the very different local economies and geographies that city regions contain (from the central business districts of core cities through to post-industrial towns, suburbs and edge lands)
- coordinate decarbonisation policies with those designed to improve air quality
- promote car restraint measures which are appropriate and realisable
- take a view on the trade-offs between measures which reduce carbon and those which will improve the resilience of transport infrastructure to the more extreme weather conditions that are already occurring (such as through blue-green infrastructure to deal with higher temperatures and more intense rainfall)
- adopt a coordinated approach to national and local emergencies
- ensure better coordination of the planning of transport with the provision of faster and more reliable broadband connections, and respond to the travel patterns associated with more home working

1. We explore this in more detail in our report 'The place to be: How transit oriented development can support good growth in the city regions' which can be found [here](#)

2. We have produced a number of resources for the transport and health sectors to support collaborative working which can be found [here](#)

3. We explore this in more detail in our report 'Making the connections on climate' which can be found [here](#)

Funding

For too long funding for investment in urban transport has been short term with far too much reliance on a shifting mix of ad hoc competition funding. This is an inefficient way of funding local transport, with millions wasted in putting failed bids together, as well as creating peaks and troughs in spending which makes projects more expensive. It also stifles coherent long term approaches to tackling long term problems, soaks up organisational capacity, and is in stark contrast to the long term funding deals that have been in place for some time for national roads and rail.

This problem has been dramatically exacerbated by the Treasury favouring short term emergency funding support (on a different basis for different modes) to cover the public transport revenue gap created by COVID-19 - with the risk that this funding will be scaled back or withdrawn prematurely. In addition to inhibiting medium term planning, if Government doesn't continue to close the funding gap then the consequences will be cutbacks in public transport provision which will go against Government's wider transport decarbonisation plans as well as undermine a green recovery from COVID-19.

Although there has been Government investment in urban transport (including in the renewal and expansion of light rail systems), the current quantum is insufficient given the scale of the Government's aspirations for comprehensive modal shift to public transport and active travel, and the current starting point (including historic underinvestment in urban mass transit, very low levels of cycling and a declining bus network).

It is welcome, however, that the Government's aspirations remain intact - as does the additional £5 billion funding for bus and active travel which was announced early in 2020.

There is an opportunity therefore to use the Spending Review to build a bridge between where we are now and a more secure and long term approach to funding local transport that will be needed if we are to be able to provide a base level of public transport provision and if transport authorities are to be able to turn the current crisis into an opportunity to transform urban transport for the better.

We have shovel ready schemes which can help sustain employment and kick start local economies. And with long term, rather than stop/start funding, we can develop and deliver a pipeline of schemes which are calibrated to maximise the employment and economic benefits for the places we serve.

Powers

As well as being properly funded, city region transport authorities need to be fully empowered to do their job.

Devolution of powers over the local rail networks in Merseyside and in London has led to higher levels of passenger satisfaction, more investment and better services. There is the potential to widen and deepen the benefits that rail devolution brings to more passengers and more places. With greater control over local rail services comes the opportunity to improve integration with bus and tram, and with local housing and economic plans.

With buses now dependent on national and local government funding support, there is the opportunity to use this funding to place bus services outside London on a similar footing to the emergency management agreements being used on rail - whereby in return for public funding, rail companies are contractually obliged to provide the service which best meets the needs of the travelling public during the period of the pandemic. If transport authorities

were able to do the same for their local bus networks then this would give greater security for passengers on fares and services whilst providing the basis for building a better future for buses when patronage has recovered. This could be done through further streamlining existing bus legislation to allow transport authorities to continue existing arrangements with operators, or a transition to direct provision, or to the franchising of networks of bus services to private operators (using broadly the same model as currently applies in London).

In London, Transport for London has responsibility for key roads, the provision of a fully integrated public transport network as well as taxi and Private Hire Vehicle licencing. This is not the case for England's other city regions but is an option which should be available to every city region.

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Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has hit city region economies hard. It has also dealt a major blow to public transport, from which a complete recovery looks unlikely anytime soon.

Short term funding deals for public transport - with the threat of an early exit by the Treasury - risk accelerating the spiralling decline of bus networks and ramping up car use as a consequence. In the process, this will worsen social inequalities, slow the economic recovery, as well as generate more carbon emissions and air pollution. At the same time, and more positively, the Government's aspirations for a big shift to active travel and public transport - as part of its wider transport decarbonisation plans - remain intact. As does its 'levelling up' agenda.

Transport authorities have again proved their worth in their response to the COVID-19 crisis - they have kept the wheels of public transport turning, getting essential workers where they needed to be during the lockdown and helped city regions gradually get back on their feet during the initial recovery phase.

To build back better from this crisis there is a need to give city region transport authorities the longer term funding certainty and powers they require to be able to respond adroitly and at scale to the challenges ahead. This will allow them to play their part in shaping the legacy of COVID-19 for the city regions in a positive way, rather than be constrained bystanders as the consequences of COVID-19 run their often negative course.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown how quickly radical policy change can occur during the lockdown and immediate recovery phase. We now need that same radical approach to the powers and funding that city regions need to tackle the transport challenges they face and to build back better from this crisis.

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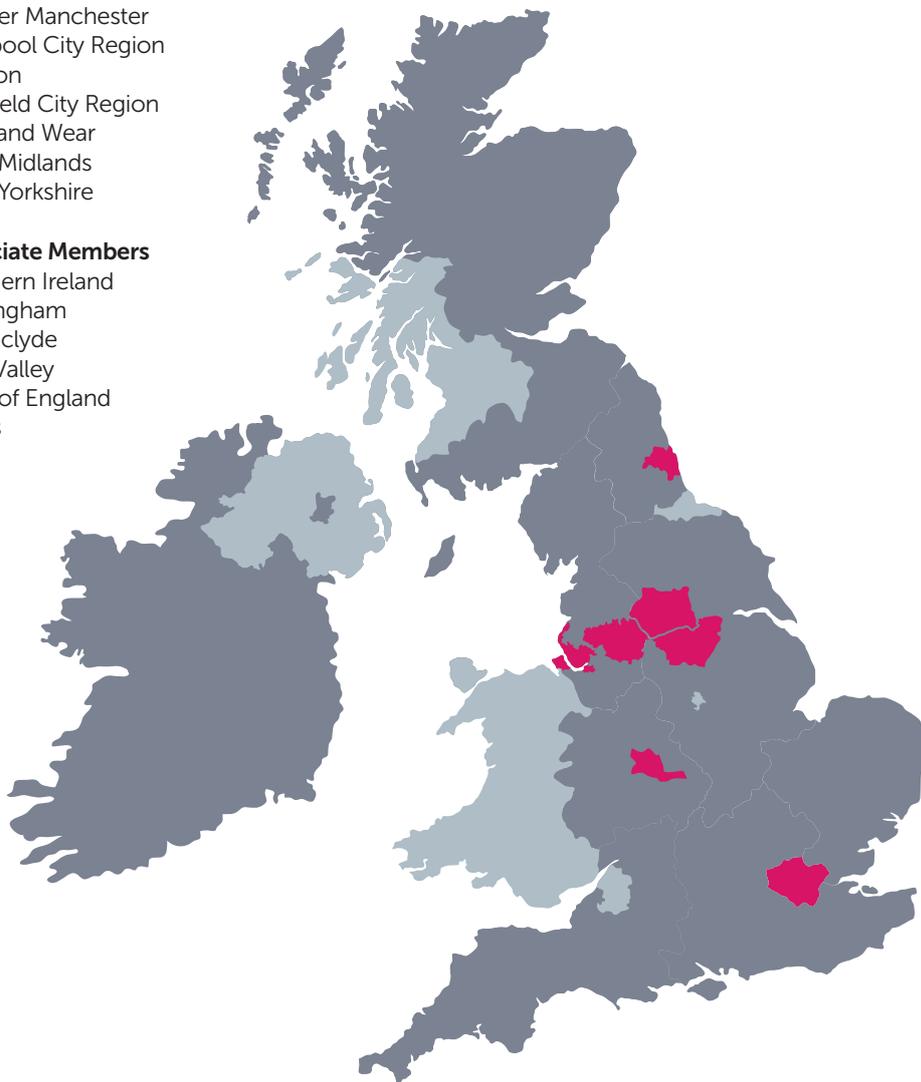
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Wellington House,
40-50 Wellington Street,
Leeds LS1 2DE

0113 251 7204
info@urbantransportgroup.org
www.urbantransportgroup.org

