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The hard work begins - fight smart!

As the pandemic recedes and recovery begins, public transport will come under pressure to survive without emergency support

► In some ways getting the funding to keep public transport going during the pandemic was the easy bit. During the pandemic it was important for government to keep the public transport show on the road, along with the companies that provide it, to prevent a wider sense of societal and economic breakdown. As a result the wheels kept turning and nobody went out of business. No passengers? No problem.

The government filled the funding gap. But if - and it's a big if - we are now moving beyond the pandemic's ability to trigger another set of significant restrictions on movement, then the existential threat to the industry is no longer there. And then what happens to funding? June 21 is in Whitehall's mind - the point at which we transition away from emergency funding. What comes next is very much up for grabs.

One thing for sure is that there will still be a funding gap to fill after June 21. The best guess being that patronage will be significantly below what it was before the pandemic (which was shrinking anyway for bus). This is based on the assumption that there will be more people working from home and even greater antipathy to using public transport from those that weren't pre-disposed to it before.

Let's look at the positives first for funding post June 21. For those who like their glass half full we now have a bus strategy - with a prime ministerial foreword - which wants more, better and cheaper buses. And it wants them everywhere. The pro-bus message was

also part of the wider Conservative pitch to towns, like Hartlepool, which felt keenly that they had lost out as both the public and private sector shrank bank from post-industrial towns in recent decades.

Backing that up is the largely unspent £3bn transformational funding for bus - as well as other funding streams (like the intra-city fund) which buses could benefit from.

More widely, the consensus around backing public transport has never been stronger. You will struggle to find many politicians of any stripe who aren't in favour. And now more politicians are evangelists for it too.

Just as Johnson's London experience, and 'Red Wall' ambitions have convinced him that buses are good politics for the Conservatives,



for Labour, Andy Burnham's decision to go all out for franchising has cut through perhaps more than any other single non-London mayoral initiative has ever done. It's the only big mayoral policy that most national journalists can name. Taking back control of the buses in Greater Manchester spoke to the conurbation's sense of self like little else could.

Meanwhile, as the pandemic becomes less dominant in lives and headlines it creates a space for attention to return to the climate again. A transport decarbonisation strategy should drop soon which will set the terms of engagement over the level of the UK's ambition on transport in the run up to COP26 in Glasgow.

Importantly too, the environment is no longer seen as separate from, and indeed a drag on, the economy. Decarbonisation of key sectors of the economy has now scaled up sufficiently for the green economy to become one of the drivers of the national economy. Green buses being one part of this.

So that's the half full glass - but what is there for the pessimistic among us who suspect the glass is half empty?

Whitehall is conflicted. Despite the big ambitions of the bus strategy, and on climate, there is the instinct to go back to 'normal' both on funding levels and on returning local public transport to a 'commercial' basis. This instinct is strongest at the Treasury which is in full bean counting mode. Meanwhile, the trajectory of recent spending reviews has been to screw down non-protected departments' core funding (including that of both the Department for Transport and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government). A lot of the DfT's budget is also already spoken for on HS2, national rail and the national roads programme. All of which squeezes out support for local transport.

And all of this is set against a backdrop whereby year on year use of local public transport gets more expensive when compared with car use. As long as this is the case then you have to pour more and more money into public transport to have a hope of keeping it in the game.

So which of these factors will prevail when it comes to funding from June 21 and beyond? It's all to play for but the bus strategy feels like the strongest card we have. After all, what sense would it make to take decisions on funding

“The absurd costs of the zombie national roads programme is there for the taking”



post June 21 which will lead to fares hikes and service cuts on public transport when we have a PM-backed bus strategy which promises the exact opposite? As far as kryptonite to use on the Treasury goes - it's the best we've got.

Even so, a strong case will need to be made both in the run up to June 21 and to the multi-year spending review due in the autumn. One that brings to life the key role the sector has played both during the pandemic and will play in building back better afterwards. A case that needs to be part of a wider and smart fightback.

What might the other elements of such a smart fight back be? Evening up the comparative cost and ease of using local public transport compared with driving is never easy, especially given the culture war dimension. But the Super Thursday elections give some hope.

The anti-Low Traffic Neighbourhoods movement made no headway in the London elections (indeed, in general, the mayoral candidates with progressive agendas and/or strong delivery records on transport, did well).

The Welsh Government also now has a mandate to pursue the commitment in its transport strategy to “develop a fair and equitable road-user charging in Wales and explore other disincentives to car use...”.

Alongside that there are cities that will

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now be pushing ahead with further measures to improve air quality which will also bring dividends for public transport.

As well as supporting and nurturing these kind of initiatives a smart fightback should also involve picking a few fights where money on transport is being spent on what can no longer be justified in a warming world.

Good on the Rail Delivery Group for showing how it is done by fronting up in the media on making the case for Air Passenger Duty not to be cut. The absurd scale and costs of the zombie national roads programme is there for the taking.

Alongside these efforts to level the playing field we also need to find other ways of getting people and politicians excited about public transport. Free fares certainly does this where it’s been introduced in some smaller cities and towns in Europe - but less attention has been given in the UK to the big European cities that are now seeking to emulate Vienna’s 365 euro a year travel pass (one euro a day). It’s striking, it’s simple, it’s cheap to use - whilst still raising

some revenue.

Meanwhile, in Scotland the age group that pay to use public transport is shrinking. If you are under 22 you now get free bus travel. So, what does a smart fightback look like in summary?

Find ways of getting people (and politicians) excited about public transport.

Nurture every brave initiative that emerges to even up the score between the cost of using cars and the cost of using public transport - whilst picking some strategic fights with expensive and regressive transport policies that are obviously past their sell by date.

Keep your eyes on the decarbonisation prize - all rails and bus lanes lead to Glasgow.

Think about fares when seeking to win back as much of what we had as possible - and in growing new markets where we can’t.

Fight smart - because the tough bit is about to start. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

▶ Jonathan Bray is the director of the Urban Transport Group. Throughout his career in policy and lobbying roles he has been at the frontline in bringing about more effective, sustainable and equitable transport policies.