

# JONATHAN BRAY



## This is not the new normal we hoped for

As we brace ourselves for a difficult period, we need to get a grip on face masks, bus-friendly active travel and collaborative working

► September brought an abrupt end to the dreams of the summer of a linear recovery from Covid-19, where empty office blocks would spring back into strip-lit life and zoned out commuters would again graze the shelves of Prets.

However, once more the virus has shown that it is not prepared to enter into reasonable negotiations and come to a compromise. And now as October turns the temperatures down to a level the virus prefers, its resurgence could signal the start of a new normal. Just not the 'new normal' we were hoping for back in the summer. Instead, this could be a new normal of oscillating restrictions which fall short of the long haul national lockdown of the Spring but which is nothing like the life we used to have pre-Covid.

For public transport, this has already meant a levelling off of the growth that was occurring and in some cases the start of a gentle dip. In many areas, this has happened just before an unstoppable force (growth in patronage) collided with an immovable object (socially distanced capacity). For many areas this alleviates what would have been a very difficult problem to solve. If public transport patronage does hover around the 40 to 50% band during this new normal, then the case for longer term Covid-19 funding support for this period is further strengthened. Because - as in the national lockdown - public transport will continue to play a key role in getting essential workers where they need to be. But

more than that, it will also be providing wider life support for local economies, keeping the arteries flowing. And, compared to the national lockdown, we will be seeing fewer empty vehicles.

Again, this strengthens the case for stable, rather than provisional, additional Covid-19 funding support to close the revenue gap caused by the pandemic. We will soon find out if this is to be the case with Transport for London's latest funding deadline approaching on October 17, funding for the five LRT systems outside London and Blackpool on October 26 and with bus services on the precipice of funding withdrawal being triggered at any time with eight weeks' notice.

Part of the new normal will also be about how we keep services moving at a time when national testing capacity is limited and to what extent and how quickly we can ensure greater access to testing for the industry. Amber lights are already starting to flash on this one.

### Face control

Face coverings are also part of our new normal - and no longer something that's only necessary on public transport (which also helps reduce the associated stigma for public

**"This could be a new normal of oscillating restrictions"**

transport). Enforcement and messaging is helping to support high levels of compliance in general - but the more prevalent the virus becomes, the more passengers will see those who aren't covering up as both unacceptably selfish and a clear and present danger to them personally. Face covering use can also decline as the day turns into night and in particular among peer pressured groups of young people (including school children).

The situation is further complicated by the fact that anyone can also self identify as someone for whom face covering regulations don't apply by saying that they are not required to wear one due to an unspecified disability or medical reason. Whilst there are good reasons for this, it is also clearly open to abuse. The government's approach to face covering use has been to incrementally ratchet up the rhetoric and the fines. However, it's far from clear that this will be enough to get to where we should be. Which is that there should only be three types of people using public transport - those wearing face coverings; those who are legitimately exempt; and those who aren't wearing a face covering and as a result won't be on public transport for very long and/or whose bank account will be diminished as a result.

If that's the end state we want, then we need to move from the incremental to something more decisive. This could include giving transport authorities outside London more enforcement options - given only the police can enforce rules at present. This means discretionary powers to utilise additional staff to support the police on enforcement as TfL are able. It also means moving beyond informal self identification of exemption status. Keeping it simple stupid on school transport would also help by making face coverings compulsory on dedicated school services as well as on regular public transport which carries school traffic. All backed up by greater clarity over what Covid-19 funding streams can be used to close the gap on face covering take up. If we can do that we can then follow up by homing in on the correct use of face coverings - ie. they are there to cover your mouth and nose.

### The revolution will not be motorised

A feature of the Summer was active travel euphoria as leisure cycling soared, main roads into city centres were adapted with pop-up cycle lanes for mass commuting, and the



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government’s active travel strategy declared that Copenhagen and Amsterdam should watch out as Britain would soon be at their shoulder. As we enter Autumn, the euphoria is wearing off as a culture war backlash rages in London and elsewhere (which has spilled over into parliament and the cabinet) over the pace of change. A battle between the metro and the retro, and between those who like the way their street now looks and feels and are willing to give the new a try; and those for whom the inconvenience they feel it causes is the last thing they need in their busy lives in the middle of a pandemic.

Meanwhile, a hoped-for exponential growth in utility cycling (at a time when many offices are closed) is not materialising in many areas. Whilst government has called on local authorities to be swift, consultative and simultaneously excellent in every way on cycling, it has been, and still is, also dragging its feet on getting the cheques out of the door that local councils need to fulfil these goals. The second tranche of active travel funding that was first announced in May still hasn’t been paid out.

Momentum is everything if the current moment isn’t to be looked back on as a false

dawn for active travel. This means we need to speed up the flow of funding to local government and create more capacity at the centre (at the Department for Transport and at the new Active Travel England body). At this critical point in the battle for hearts and minds, we also need more air cover from government. A summer manifesto of active travel ambitions with a foreword from the PM is a big deal, and was and should be rightly celebrated - but it’s not enough on its own and needs to be reinforced as the going gets tougher.

However, one good thing about the slowing of the cavalry charge on active travel is that it means that instead of a focus on banging in active travel schemes quickly, more attention can be given to thinking through how active travel can be encouraged without disadvantaging the bus. So that low traffic neighbourhoods can also be public transport neighbourhoods. A key task perhaps for the forthcoming national bus strategy.

## Tough winter ahead

Personally, I’ve had enough of this winter. And it hasn’t even started yet. A long slog of indoor days of rolling Teams meetings beckons as the daylight outside shortens and with the options

dwindling on what to do if you do go outside the house. However, it’s good to feel useful and those teams calls (where UTG Board, bus, rail, light rail, finance, active travel groups and more besides regularly liaise) are proving invaluable in sharing approaches and intel, and as a point of contact with the DfT. Engagement with the department has also been good.

The main challenge has been being at the receiving end of a wider top down and broadcast-mode approach to the crisis from the government as a whole, and lack of a sense of common endeavour over how best to tackle what’s coming next in good time to prepare for it - rather than wait for it to smash us all in the face. Preparation for the schools return was the most notable exception, with more inclusive and visible forward planning. Winter planning will be the next test. ■

## 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.

