

# NIC: Levelling up cities needs flexible, improved networks and funding

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The National Infrastructure Commission (NIC) has said that levelling up needs better urban transport networks taking people around cities — backed by funding from government.

A report from NIC said cities will need to redouble efforts to make public transport networks and active travel options more attractive to get people out of their cars post-COVID.

It added a “wait and see” approach will only delay necessary investment which would ensure systems can adapt to future demand.

- **National Infrastructure Commission: “Slow progress” being made towards levelling up and net zero**
- **Sir John Armitt: “The year ahead for infrastructure”**
- **Fundamental shift in funding to local level needed to help level up English towns, recommends Commission**

That said, there is a note of caution on assuming transport use will go back to how it was pre-pandemic:

“Uncertainty should be met with ambitious but adaptable plans that take account of possible changes in travel patterns, rather than doing nothing or continuing with existing plans.”

The report highlights the extent to which the Covid-19 pandemic has changed the urban work environment, with 14 per cent of adults working exclusively from home and 24 per cent of people working to some sort of ‘hybrid’ pattern last month. And while visits to workplaces in the seven largest cities outside London have increased in recent months, data from Google show they are still 30 per cent lower than before the pandemic.

The report says public transport schemes or enhancements to existing services will have to be adaptive by design, with cities encouraged to consider “projects which can be modularised, with low regret first stages clearing the way for more ambitious later ones.”

To ensure success, planners will need to pay attention to factors such as pricing, reliability, accessibility and safety, all of which impact on passengers’ willingness to swap their car for public transport.

None of this improvement, NIC says, should be at the expense of the environment. It emphasised that surface transport is the largest source of carbon emissions, and the sector faces a huge challenge to meet the interim targets in the government’s sixth carbon budget for 2035. While by 2050, the electrification of cars and vans on the road is expected to be all but complete, the earlier deadline is far more stretching – so city leaders, working with central government, need to find additional ways of cutting the carbon associated with urban travel.

Considerations to tackle car excessive use include congestion zone charges.

NIC chair, Sir John Armitt, said: “We must resist any idea that travelling into and around our cities is a social ill. Making it easier for more people to travel in and around them, in a low carbon way, is an economic and social necessity.

“With many cities already back to pre-pandemic road congestion levels, a shift in demand from cars to public transport and active travel is the most sustainable route open. In some places this transition will need to be supported by demand management schemes, carefully designed to shift rather than reduce journeys overall.

“More trips with fewer negative impacts would be challenging to deliver in normal times, but it’s doubly so with the fog of uncertainty generated by the pandemic. Cities have to remain ambitious in their visions for the future, but base that ambition on plans which are flexible enough to cope with whatever the future holds.”