

Survey reveals public's travel plans post-COVID

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Cars will continue to be the preferred mode of transport for around half of journeys post-COVID, a survey of travel plans has revealed, putting climate targets and a fair economic recovery at risk according to leading sustainable transport charity Campaign for Better Transport.

The survey, which was carried at last month, asked people what modes of transport they used before the pandemic for various activities and which they intend to use once all restrictions are lifted. It showed the UK adult population largely expecting to choose to travel as they did before the pandemic, with private cars remaining the dominant form of transport for around half of trips for shopping (50% vs. 49% before the pandemic), leisure (54% vs. 52%) and personal matters (53% vs. 52%). The proportion of people who intend to use public transport once restrictions are lifted is very similar to the proportion who used it before the pandemic, but this is likely to be affected by the kinds of journeys people need to make in the future.

Paul Tuohy, Chief Executive of Campaign for Better Transport, said: "Cars are the main contributor to carbon emissions and lethal air pollution, so returning to a car-dominated transport network is simply not an option post-COVID. Our research highlights that unless the Government does more to promote public

transport and encourage its use, we cannot hope to reduce harmful emissions or build back in a way that is fair and sustainable.”

Campaign for Better Transport’s survey revealed that:

- UK adults largely expect to choose to travel as they did before the pandemic with private cars remaining the dominant form of transport for around half for shopping, leisure and personal matters
- Two thirds (65%) of UK adults in employment were working entirely from their place of work before the pandemic, whereas just half (53%) plan to do so when restrictions begin to ease
- Slightly more people plan to use the car for the school run post-Covid – up from 19 per cent to 22 per cent
- Less crowded services, cheaper tickets and better routes came top of the public’s wish list to encourage increased use of public transport post-pandemic.

The research asked people what would encourage them to increase their use of public transport in the future. Less crowding (30%) came top, followed by cheaper tickets (29%), better routes (29%), and more frequent (26%) and punctual (22%) services. Simpler payment options (e.g. the ability to ‘touch in and out’) would encourage 15 per cent of respondents, with 12 per cent saying better access to real time information would make them choose public transport more often.

The survey also asked people about their work plans post-COVID and revealed that whilst two thirds (65%) of all those in employment were working entirely from their place of work before the pandemic, just half (53%) plan to do so after restrictions begin to ease.

Although the survey revealed a similar proportion of people currently intend to use the train or bus to travel to work post-pandemic, the lack of affordable ticketing options for part-time commuters could result in an increase in car use or a delay to the economic recovery. At present, there are no flexible season tickets for people commuting part time which must be addressed to encourage people to commute sustainably by rail where possible.

Perhaps most worryingly, the research revealed that a fifth (20%) of UK adults say nothing would currently encourage them to increase their use of public transport, rising to 29 per cent among those aged 55 and over. This shows that the Government still has a long way to go in getting its messaging right and reversing the damage done during the pandemic to the perceived safety of public transport.

Mr Tuohy added: “The Government must act to ensure people feel confident choosing public transport. Public transport, along with cycling and walking, should be the first choice for journeys, and the Government must start getting that message out there. As well as flying the flag for public transport, the Government could help immediately boost passenger numbers and reduce car use by introducing flexible rail tickets for the millions of part-time commuters returning to our towns and city centres over the coming months.”

Responding to the survey, Robert Nisbet, Director of Nations and Regions at the Rail Delivery Group, said: “Britain’s rail companies want to support green economic growth across the country rather than a car-led recovery after the pandemic, and we’re helping people to travel with confidence with added services, extra cleaning and ventilation.

“As this survey shows, the pandemic has been rocket fuel to changing travel patterns and while train operators are working with government on new flexible tickets for commuters, we want the underpinnings of the system to be rewired so we can deliver the simpler, more flexible and better-value fares which passengers increasingly want.”

Photo credit: Rail Delivery Group