

# **Sustainable Transport Herefordshire**

# **Post Lockdown**

***It ain't going to be easy  
from now on!***

## **It Ain't Going to be Easy from Now On**

In the words of the song by Elton John *'It ain't going to be easy from now on'*! With the government's economic policy (if ever there was one) in complete tatters it is easy to see that people are beginning to wonder and get twitchy about what will happen when the Covid 19 crisis is over. 7.5 million workers are having their wages paid by the government and the Institute of Fiscal Studies estimates the total bill as more than £80 billion. According to Paul Johnson, its director:

*'To put that in context, in eight months, that is more than we spend on the education system in an entire year, it's many times what we spend on the police, it's many times more than we spend on social care, it's about half what we spend on the whole NHS in a year.'*

The government could also have built more than three quarters of HS2 for the same money.

What about transport? The Department for Transport has suspended rail franchise arrangements and transferred all revenue and cost risk to the government. The package is expected to run into billions with current estimates at £600 million a month. The government has agreed to pay £167 million to bus companies to keep services running on reduced timetables. The government has also promised that £200 million of existing funding through the Bus Services Operators Grant will continue to be paid as normal even though not all services are running.

With all this money pouring out of the Treasury chest at an alarming rate it is not surprising that the hawks in the government are snapping at the prime minister's heels and baying for a kick start to the economy. The unpalatable truth to them is that the Covid 19 crisis has forced on them a move towards government intervention of a social kind in a free market economy. Cries of horror rent the air!

Whilst not as yet in the same league as the banking crisis of 2008, nevertheless the balance of payments is taking a knocking and this is bound to impact on all sectors of the British economy. We are also in a post Brexit situation and will most likely lose a large slice of the European market for British exports, whilst the world is showing signs of entering a period of recession which will make selling Britain overseas and attracting investment somewhat difficult.

### **What is likely to happen on the transport front.?**

On the positive side the government is pushing for more cycling and walking with the announcement of a £250 million emergency active travel fund. The Minister for Transport announced:

*'Pop-up bike lanes with protected space for cycling, wider pavements, safer junctions, and cycle and bus-only corridors will be created in England within weeks as part of a £250 million emergency active travel fund - the first stage of a £2 billion investment, as part of the £5 billion in new funding announced for cycling and buses in February.'*

*Following unprecedented levels of walking and cycling across the UK during the pandemic, the plans will help encourage more people to choose alternatives to public transport when they need to travel, making healthier habits easier and helping make sure the road, bus and rail networks are ready to respond to future increases in demand.'*

The encouraging fact about this announcement is the realisation that cycling is closely linked to safety, hence the mention of protected spaces. However, with only 1% of journeys made by cycle in 2018 can the unprecedented levels of walking and cycling during the pandemic can be maintained and built upon. Many journeys to work are of considerable length in the current dispersed locations of home and work places. Some compact small cities will be able to build successfully on a cycling and walking strategy where journey lengths are short. Hereford is an excellent example.

On a less positive side, whilst public transport is likely to remain the main alternative to using the car, what is the future for it? Overcoming the dent of confidence in using buses and trains during a pandemic and afterwards is going to be a major task. Maintaining and building on adequate levels of service to allow for a comfortable journey is going to continue to demand increased government and local authority financial support.

The Department for Transport is alarmingly aware that the number of companies willing to run trains in this country is in decline. Britain is no longer a good investment and the risk factor inherent in operating trains is too high. The Williams Rail Review, instigated well before this crisis to look at the structure of the rail industry, has already made noises highly critical of the present franchise system. Direct rail support, PTE grants and central government grants totalled £4.3 billion in 2018-19. This represents a 5.6% real terms increase on 2017-18 (*source: Government Office of Rail & Road*). What the Williams Rail Review comes up with is yet to be seen. The review panel may be scratching their heads over the current situation and the pointers that the rail system is going to need more and not less government support. This then could lead to the search for significant cost savings to be made.

The future situation for bus services is even more shaky. With the large bus companies baying at the government that the current £167 million is not enough to keep even reduced service levels going during the crisis it is quite likely that a full return to service levels pre emergency will not occur. In rural and inter-urban areas it is possible that a significant number of services and journeys will fall out of the commercial category. This leaves the decision to the local transport authority as to whether or not to continue them through the award of contracts by competitive tendering. Local authorities have been at the butt end of government budget cut-backs for over a decade. They are unlikely to be able to increase their support for bus services post emergency unless the government provides special measures to help them, especially the rural ones. In Herefordshire most of the bus services between the market towns and the city are run commercially. Will they survive without future support?

This leaves us yet again with the car as the main mode of travel. We are now well aware of the impact of the car and lorry on the environment. The lockdown has given us a noticeable improvement in air quality, especially in the early days when road traffic dropped significantly. Part of this was also to do with the quick moves by companies to arrange a work from home situation. The lockdown also improved the environment of our towns and cities with greatly reduced congestion, not that we were able to take full advantage of this during the stay at home period. Do we want to return to a pre-emergency situation? I believe an increasing majority of people would say no.

Professor John Whitelegg hit the nail on the head in his book *Mobility: A New Urban Design and Transport Planning Philosophy for a Sustainable Future*. The book presents a detailed case for the transformation of mobility and states: '*After over a century of rapid growth in distances travelled and the multiplication of expensive infrastructure (roads, high speed rail, airports) we have passed a tipping point.*' The demand for transport is highly related to land use and the structure of the economy. This fundamental linkage of land use and transport however has conveniently been lost in the free market economy approach. However it is the key to the future.

Lockdown tells us that reducing the need for travel can help improve air quality, the environment and assist the public transport system to cope adequately and safely with a reduced volume. But it requires a fundamental shift in government policy from that of a macro economic system to a structured micro economic system of sustainable communities, large and small. Whether the current government can break away from the entrenched ideology of the free market and turn to the needs of the country and its people is the big, big question. Perhaps a re-read by the prime minister and his government of the book '*The Big Society: The Anatomy of a New Politics*' by Jesse Norman MP will help. However, in the present and in the words of the Lindsfarne group tune (*slightly modified to read country*):

*'I'm feeling rather sorry for a man I know  
The country he holds in trembling hands  
Is asking where to go?'*

# **Sustainable Transport Herefordshire**

## **Who Are We?**

We are a small group of professionals who embrace transport and land use planning, economics, the environment and who see into the future and learn from the past.

The realisation that future transport has to change led to the formation of the **Herefordshire Sustainable Transport Group** in 2017 (HSTG).

We publish under the title of **Sustainable Transport Herefordshire**.

Our principal aim is to examine and study innovative, environmental and economic changes in transport that can be applied to Herefordshire's current transport problems. We seek to work with the local transport authority, local MPs, the Department for Transport, transport operators and community groups in planning the future.

HSTG is an Independent Group allied to Rail & Bus for Herefordshire and the Herefordshire Transport Alliance.

**For a full list of our reports in PDF format contact:**

**Gareth Calan Davies ([ghal@btinternet.com](mailto:ghal@btinternet.com))**

**Carole Protherough ([protheroughcarole32@gmail.com](mailto:protheroughcarole32@gmail.com))**

**[info@herefordshiresustainabletransportgroup.org.uk](mailto:info@herefordshiresustainabletransportgroup.org.uk)**