


SUSTAINABLE TRAVEL

CARS – THE END OF THE LOVE AFFAIR



Re  **set**

**lessons from
lockdown**

CARS – THE END OF THE LOVE AFFAIR

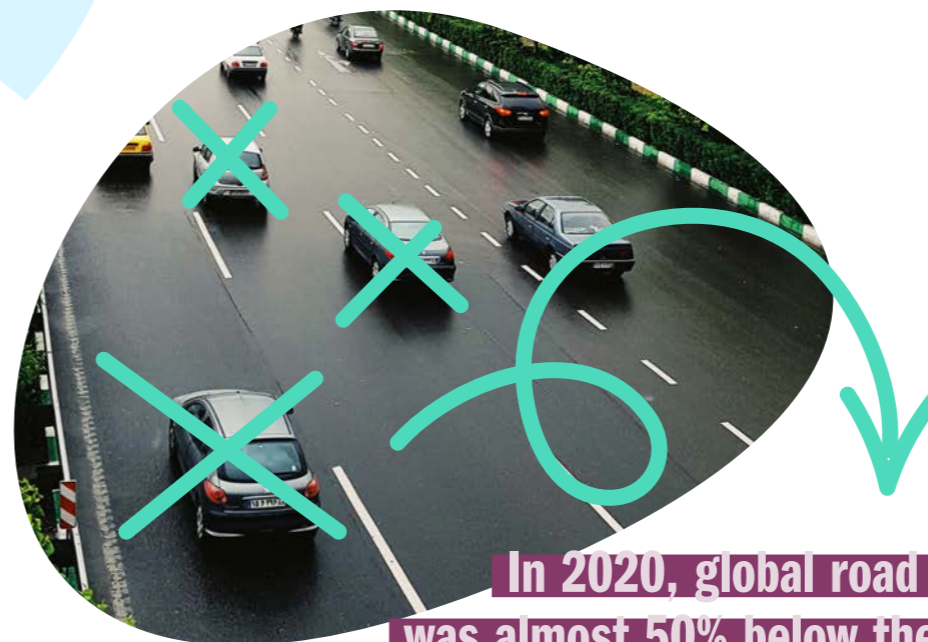


How the pandemic helped people ditch polluting travel habits and pick-up new, cleaner, healthier ones

As an enabler of people meeting and gathering together, transport found itself in an unprecedented and existential crisis during the global pandemic. From car journeys and riding on public transport, to international air and train travel, COVID-19 affected every mode of transport. In 2020, **global road transport was almost 50% below the 2019 average and commercial air travel was nearly 75% below the 2019 average.**¹ Despite the visible rush to get back to the abnormality of pre-pandemic life, and politicians willing the pandemic's impact on everyday life to be over, our daily travel habits have changed significantly – and perhaps permanently.

The experience of the global pandemic and its fallout constitutes a paradigm shift for transport. And as people experienced some of the positive impacts of reduced transport, from lower levels of air pollution to fewer traffic deaths, governments and transport providers are now exploring alternative ways of getting people from A to B that don't cost the earth and clog the skies.

There's evidence that the great modal shift is already underway, **with the vast uptake in cycling throughout Europe and further afield, the construction of active travel infrastructure, which took the streets back from cars and gave it to people and children,**² and **people realising that adventure, relaxation and happiness could be found much closer to home.**³



In 2020, global road transport was almost 50% below the 2019 average

How to sustain these shifts, and the positive benefits that arose from travelling differently, once the pandemic has subsided is an urgent question that remains unanswered in too many places. But fortunately, in some areas, pre-pandemic travel trends are yet to return and may never do so. A recent report on the UK from **CREDS**⁴ found that while economic activity has returned to pre-pandemic levels already, British citizens are still travelling less than before the onset of COVID-19. These findings are significant as they contradict the dominant idea that more travel automatically equates to greater levels of economic activity. In the wake of the pandemic, **this idea no longer holds.**⁵

“We can think of transportation primarily in its function to provide access to opportunities – such as jobs, education, services. The pandemic has made this even more clear. During the pandemic we’ve seen transport leadership around the world – rapidly accelerated planning cycles led to fast implementation of cycling, walking or transit infrastructure: the transport modes we need to scale up to tackle the climate crisis. A crucial task for leaders around the world now is to maintain and even accelerate this fast paced action towards climate friendly transportation.”

Daniel Moser, Senior Transport Specialist at the World Bank

In many parts of the world, road traffic volumes are still lower than they were before the onset of the pandemic. In Ireland, where people have been encouraged to return to work and restrictions have been eased, **levels of traffic are still between 5% and 20% lower⁶** than pre-pandemic, depending on the road. A survey of data collected by a leading satnav company, **shows that traffic congestion in cities around the world was 10% lower in 2021 than it was in 2019, with 283 of the 404 cities⁷** surveyed experiencing less traffic than they did before the global pandemic.

During rush hour, the drop in traffic was even more apparent **at 19% lower than pre-pandemic levels.⁸** Traffic in the UK is still not back to pre-pandemic levels either, with weekend car traffic in England **sitting around 10% below the levels experienced before the lockdowns.⁹** The amount of people now working from home, and companies adjusting to this new reality, has had profound impacts on travel behaviour. But even if all the people who switched to working from home in the UK were to go back to travelling for half of their working week, **car commuter miles will still be reduced by 16%.¹⁰**



working from home



All across Europe, cities spent a combined €1 billion on improving cycling infrastructures during the pandemic

“The pandemic has highlighted the importance of building and maintaining resilient communities. Wales’ UN-endorsed Well-being of Future Generations Act allows us to make the right decisions to help us shift towards a longer-term and preventative outlook on how we run our society and public services. Recently we have focused on reducing our reliance on cars in Welsh cities, and considered mobility as a wider route to well-being. In Cardiff the introduction of the act has led to a tenfold increase in investment into safe routes to cycle and to walk. We’ve targeted this investment towards neighbourhoods that have the highest level of air pollution and the lowest life expectancy. Taking a holistic approach to transport policy – in which environmental, social, cultural and economic well-being are of equal importance – has never been more key.”

Sophie Howe, Wales Future Generations Commissioner.

The benefits of traffic not resurging are both obvious and more subtle. One of the most striking benefits is the drop in road traffic deaths and injuries around the globe. **One study found a reduction in road traffic deaths in 32 of the 36 countries between April 2019 and 2020, with a decrease of 50% or more in 12 countries.¹¹** People are also buying fewer cars, which stops emissions from entering the atmosphere in the first place. While there are many reasons for falling car ownership, the pandemic certainly exacerbated it. In the UK, the **sale of used – and, in particular, new – cars has fallen below pre-pandemic levels in the UK¹²** and there has been a **significant increase in the number of households reducing from two cars to one.¹³** Despite what many people thought, the pandemic did not lead to a ‘dash to the car’¹⁴ and instead may accelerate the move towards **Car-Free Megacities.¹⁵**

Many people also used the disruption of the pandemic, and the additional free time it afforded them, to walk. And in some contexts, the huge increases in travel by bike and foot continued even as the world began to emerge. **People hiking in the USA increased by around 135% during the pandemic¹⁶** with many of the **American national parks still reporting record breaking numbers of visitors.¹⁷** In the UK, the massive increase in walking seen in **October 2020 had been maintained well into 2021.¹⁸** Alongside walking and hiking, many people **got on their bikes.¹⁹** In the city of Barcelona, the **levels of cycling are 10% higher than pre-pandemic levels.²⁰** In the French capital, Paris, **cycling is estimated to have grown by 70% since the spring of 2020.²¹** These increases have been supported through government policy and infrastructure projects. All across Europe, cities **spent a combined €1 billion on improving cycling infrastructures²²** during the pandemic, creating over 1,000 km of cycle lanes, low traffic neighbourhoods (LTNs) and car-free streets.

Much of this infrastructure will stay in place so people can continue to benefit from safe and accessible walking and cycling routes, as well as the health benefits that come from exercise and lower levels of air pollution. And people are keen that these measures stay in place long after the pandemic has subsided. A **YouGov survey of adults across 21 European cities²³** found that nearly two in three people do not want to go back to pre-pandemic pollution levels after experiencing clean air in their cities. **Sixty-eight percent of those polled²⁴** demanded protection from air pollution, even if it means preventing polluting cars entering city centres. There’s a clear mandate from the public to accelerate the modal shift further and kick cars out of cities for good.

While the modal shift in transport is clearly underway, it is far from complete. The pandemic has given us a taste of how moving around differently can improve our lives, but to lock-in these sustainable behaviours for the foreseeable, we need to see continued investment into active travel alongside **targeted attempts to rid our cities of cars.²⁵** As the world emerges from the pandemic, there is a window of opportunity to plan transport differently. We must encourage more sustainable modes of transport and, where possible, fewer trips, as well as bolstering digital infrastructures so that virtual and remote working can continue to blossom.



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