



Covid-19 Crisis – Transport Progress Update

Date of meeting 26 June 2020

Date of report 1 June 2020

Report by Chief Executive

1. Object of report

To update the Partnership on the impacts of the Covid-19 crisis on transport in the west of Scotland, and the measures in place or being planned by SPT and other partners to address these impacts.

2. Background

- 2.1 The public health emergency caused by the Covid-19 virus is having significant effects on the people and communities of the west of Scotland, and for transport, the impacts have been huge; for example, patronage down by up to 95% on some public transport services, many services withdrawn and timetables reduced. The shock of this impact naturally triggered an immediate reaction from the transport industry, which has been seeking to maintain a sustainable level of network while balancing the conflicting demands of discouraging travel in line with government policy and maintaining essential public transport services for key workers.
- 2.2 While acknowledging the situation remains very much 'live' and fluid, and that the full scale of the impact of the crisis remains to be seen at this stage, the easing of lockdown measures in recent weeks has shifted attention towards coming out of the crisis and adjusting to what is being termed a "new normal". Further, consideration is also being given to the long-term effects of the crisis and how society can shape and adjust in a positive way in adapting to a new future.

3. Update

3.1 Scottish Government/Transport Scotland (TS) response

As the impacts of lockdown on the transport network became apparent, the Scottish Government took various steps in mitigation. For example, to offset the impact that reduced demand was having on the viability of local services for key workers and to protect the bus industry for the future, Transport Scotland agreed to continue paying National Concessionary Travel Scheme reimbursements and Bus Service Operators Grant at levels in line with previous payments. Transport Scotland has also been working closely with the ScotRail franchise holder to ensure sustainability of rail services.

3.2 Transport Transition Plan (TTP)

Emphasising that the National Transport Strategy (NTS) will continue to provide the “guiding principles for our planning Scotland’s route map through, out of the crisis and in to the future”, in late May, after the Scottish Government had presented its route-map for coming out of lockdown, Transport Scotland published a Transport Transition Plan, which covered how transport would evolve through the four phases of release from lockdown¹. The TTP has four main elements: keeping transport safe (including through the issuing of guidance for operators and passengers, which SPT had input to at draft stage); managing demand for travel; engaging with stakeholders; and adapting our transport systems to fit with the emerging new future. The TTP is intended to be a dynamic and evolving document, which will change and be updated in line with Scottish Government timelines for moving through the four phases of the route-map out of lockdown.

3.3 TTP National and Regional Advisory Groups

Transport Scotland has established a National Advisory Group for the TTP (on which the Regional Transport Partnerships of Scotland are represented by Hitrans), a group focused on transport for Scotland’s islands, and Regional Advisory Groups covering the Glasgow and Edinburgh city regions, given the predicted significant impacts of the crisis on the transport networks of these areas. SPT is represented on the Glasgow city region group, which is co-chaired by Transport Scotland and Glasgow City Council. Current focus for that group is identifying anticipated demand for travel across the city region as we progress through lockdown removal phases, and identifying priorities for intervention to assist with this. Previous work by SPT in relation to the Strathclyde Bus Investment Programme² is proving helpful in this regard. SPT is also arranging meetings with the three Ayrshire councils and Argyll & Bute Council to ensure all areas of Strathclyde are considered by and have input to the TTP in emerging from lockdown.

3.4 “Spaces for People” funding

Active travel has experienced significant growth throughout the crisis, and in further support of easing adaptation to lockdown and the TTP, Transport Scotland, through Sustrans, has made available £30m of funding through a “Spaces for People” (SfP) programme. SfP is intended to offer funding and support to make it safer in terms of physical distancing for people who choose to walk, cycle or wheel for essential trips and exercise during the crisis. Applications can be made by a range of bodies including councils and Regional Transport Partnerships, and SPT is in discussion with councils in relation to potential bids. Some awards have already been made and SPT is in dialogue with councils in this regard to seek to ensure that an integrated, co-ordinated and complementary approach is taken to any temporary infrastructure or initiatives such as footway widening, removal of on-street parking, bus priority, hubs/interchanges, park and ride, in seeking to avoid any potential modal conflict or unintended consequences. It is also worth highlighting that, as the SfP focuses on temporary active travel measures, discussions are on-going with TS and others in relation to support for public transport measures e.g. bus priority.

3.5 Face coverings/physical distancing

The issue of face coverings and physical distancing has been and remains particularly contentious in relation to public transport, with concerns being raised about enforcement and capacity reduction. At the time of writing (18 June), the Scottish Government has announced that for Phase 2, from 22 June, it will be mandatory to wear a face covering on public transport, with some exceptions. SPT welcomes this,

¹ <https://www.transport.gov.scot/coronavirus-covid-19/transport-transition-plan/>

² http://www.spt.co.uk/documents/latest/rtp071016_agenda6.pdf

as it will provide some reassurance to those who need to use public transport and it is hoped, lead to growth in passenger numbers. The Scottish Government, while emphasising that the two-metre physical distancing rule remains in place for the immediate future, continue to monitor and review this, while continuing to follow scientific advice. The potential to move to 1 or 1.5 metre physical distancing is also being considered, again provided it is in line with expert advice. SPT would welcome this, as it would facilitate a significant increase in the available capacity on public transport services in future. Officers continue to engage with Transport Scotland and the wider transport industry in regard to the above.

3.6 Impact on existing Transport Scotland/Scottish Government workstreams

Early in the lockdown period, Transport Scotland advised that a significant proportion of their staff resource was to be redeployed towards the Covid-19 relief effort and that this would naturally have an effect on any business-as-usual activity. This has in turn meant that work in relation to such initiatives as the Strategic Transport Projects Review and proposed Bus Partnership Fund has in effect been put on hold for the time being to focus on the current crisis. Further, in early May, TS confirmed that plans to introduce Low Emission Zones in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Dundee were to be paused, again to enable efforts to be focused on the Covid-19 relief effort. At a wider Scottish Government level, similar 'on hold' approaches have been taken on matters such as the National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4). Further, it is worth highlighting that the Scottish Parliament's Rural, Economy and Connectivity Committee has launched a Call for Evidence regarding the impact of the Covid-19 crisis. No deadline has been set for responses to this and SPT officers will prepare a response to this at an appropriate stage to reflect any significant issues, best practice and opportunities identified as the country emerges from lockdown.

3.7 SPT response

SPT reacted quickly to the crisis, and undertook a range of activity to adapt to the changed circumstances of lockdown. In the initial period, all SPT services remained operational, and all staff who could work from home were told to do so, enabled through digital technology provided to them. SPT's Business Continuity group was brought into action w/b 2 March (in advance of lockdown being announced on 23 March) and it continues to meet daily to ensure a co-ordinated approach, and a daily email is sent to staff updating them on relevant matters, and offering support and reassurance.

As the lockdown period progressed, at an operational level it proved necessary to adjust and tailor SPT service provision to meet the dual requirements of discouraging all but essential travel while still providing services for key workers. Passenger numbers through SPT operations, as elsewhere, quickly reduced to a very low level and, for example, the Subway began to operate a reduced service on one circle only, supplemented by a shuttle bus between Partick and Govan.

At SPT bus stations, as commercial bus operators began to reduce services, passenger demand decreased and SPT service provision was adjusted to ensure continued operation for key workers. For SPT supported socially necessary bus services, these were maintained where possible, and indeed the decline in passenger numbers on these services has not been as steep as that of the commercial bus network. SPT officers have been in regular liaison with bus operators to facilitate a suitable level of provision across the west of Scotland, and channels for regular dialogue were also maintained with ScotRail, NHS National Services Scotland and the three NHS boards in the SPT area to ensure key worker service provision remained as fit for purpose as practicable.

Where SPT supported socially necessary services were withdrawn, to ease the pressure this placed on operators and to help sustain the market, SPT took the decision to continue to pay 75% of agreed contract costs to operators. For school transport, which SPT administers on an agency basis on behalf of most of the councils in our area, after discussions with SPT, councils took individual decisions about whether to continue contract payments to help sustain operators. SPT's MyBus service was withdrawn early in the lockdown period to reflect significantly decreased demand and to assist in discouraging travel by the population groups served (and a number of MyBus contractors were also re-directed to fill gaps in local bus services and provide the shuttle service between Partick and Govan Subway Stations). The Travel Card Unit has remained open but, as elsewhere, is dealing with a reduced number of enquiries and applications for the National Concessionary Travel Card.

At the time of writing however, as the lockdown eases in line with the Scottish Government route-map and the Transport Transition Plan, there are early signs of passenger growth across the public transport network. SPT is making good progress in preparations for this, including increasing level of services on the Subway and ensuring facilities such as bus stations are ready to cope with increased passenger numbers in a safe, physically distanced context. A key challenge across public transport, including the Subway, brought on by the need for physical distancing will be the consequent reduction in capacity, expected to be between 10-25% of normally available capacity dependent on mode. Transport Scotland has also established a virtual Multi-Agency Response Team (MART) of which SPT is part and convenes daily to address any live operational issues which may occur on the transport network.

It is worth highlighting that the impact of lost revenue from decline in use of SPT services caused by the crisis is being closely monitored, and SPT is in dialogue with Transport Scotland and others in seeking to address this matter. A separate report to this Partnership meeting covers the finance issue in more detail.

SPT has also made significant efforts throughout the crisis to ensure good communication between partners, emerging good practice is shared, statistics, data and trends are monitored and analysed, and operational/temporary infrastructure changes are communicated to relevant partners to try and ensure a complementary approach. These efforts have taken a variety of forms and have included TS, councils, city region bodies, operators, the Regional Transport Partnerships of Scotland, the Urban Transport Group, passenger representative bodies including Transport Focus, health boards, Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) and many others.

For example, at SPT's instigation, and in advance of the TTP regional groups being announced, a special meeting of the Glasgow city region Transport and Connectivity portfolio group was convened to discuss an integrated and co-ordinated approach to the Covid-19 response and dealing with future implications. The meeting was attended by Transport Scotland, Clydeplan and councils. SPT has also been working with the Regional Transport Partnerships (RTPs) for Scotland to explore future opportunities for RTPs to play a key role in the long term recovery from the Covid-19 crisis, including discussions with Transport Scotland and in identifying any further "asks" of the Scottish Government as the country emerges from lockdown. Further, at Transport Scotland's request, SPT has also co-ordinated the dissemination of the many offers of assistance with transport which have been received by the Scottish Government, and these are sent to councils and CPPs for wider circulation through their networks.

3.8 Regional Transport Strategy and other regional workstreams

Members will recall that a public consultation on the Issues and Objectives of the new Regional Transport Strategy (RTS) was due to begin in March. However, as the proposed consultation would have coincided with the emergence of lockdown, this was considered inappropriate, and therefore the consultation has been postponed, with the future consultation at the Options stage of the RTS being re-scoped to accommodate this. However, research and analytical work continues in developing the RTS and further updates on any revised timelines, scope and programme will be presented to members in due course. Work has also been progressing in other areas such as the preparation and approval of a new indicative Regional Spatial Strategy by Clydeplan, and the initiation of work to deliver a feasibility study on the potential for a “metro” by the Glasgow City Region City Deal. SPT is working closely with partners in regard to these and other such workstreams.

3.9 Addressing the long-term impacts of the crisis

As lockdown eases, attention is now turning to the long-term impacts of the crisis and how to address them. The economy (and the scale of any predicted recession and job losses), the climate emergency, and heightened social inequality are some of the key matters of concern, and issues such as increased working from home, increased active travel, reduced use of public transport, more internet shopping, more cashless transactions, and many others are all gaining an increased focus of attention. Not least, the public transport industry must try and rebuild following a period where advice has been to avoid using its services and private car use seems certain to rise.

However, the new RTS presents a huge opportunity to positively shape the future for transport in the west of Scotland in supporting the economy, environment and social inclusion, strengthening focus on the strategic aims of the NTS, and delivering change in a people-centred, community-engaged, climate-aware and place-based way. It is, however, essential that any work in support of that continues to be undertaken in an objective and pragmatic manner based on as robust an evidence base as can be assembled. That approach has always been central to the development of the new RTS, and SPT remains proactive in that regard, having recently partnered with Transport Scotland in supporting a wide ranging survey, research and analysis workstream on the effects of the Covid-19 crisis on transport being undertaken by the Institute of Transport Studies at the University of Leeds. It is hoped that new work such as this will significantly contribute to aiding our understanding of the future and the most appropriate interventions needed to help our collective recovery and growth.

For the meantime, as the new RTS is developed, SPT will seek to maximise the strategic opportunities emerging from the crisis, including in relation to bus partnerships, active travel, and reducing and managing the demand for travel. Focusing on the bus market, the long term effects of the crisis remains to be seen, but any recovery is likely to prove challenging without a fundamental shift in and renewed focus on partnership working, potentially through the various provisions afforded by the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019. SPT is also, with partners, and with a view to delivering the likely step-change in public transport “offer” needed to attract people back, exploring opportunities as to how best to achieve that, be it accelerating large scale infrastructure projects or interventions, or more direct support in general for public transport services.

4. Conclusion

Without question, there is an increasing realisation that the impacts of the crisis are likely to alter how we live for many years to come. This should, however, only serve to strengthen our collective resolve to adopt a concerted, co-ordinated, objective and evidence-based approach in dealing with the fall-out of Covid-19. While the negative effects are clear to see,

there are positives too, for example, in seizing the opportunity to reshape what we do and how we do it to better deliver inclusive economic growth and address the climate emergency, retaining focus on the goals which remain true despite the current crisis. The developing RTS is the ideal vehicle with which to reaffirm our commitment to those goals, while changing the way we achieve them to take account of new circumstances. Officers will continue to keep the Partnership apprised of developments as matters progress.

5. Partnership action

The Partnership is recommended to note the contents of this report.

6. Consequences

Policy consequences	<i>Emerging at present, but current and new RTS will need to take account of Covid-19 crisis.</i>
Legal consequences	<i>None at present.</i>
Financial consequences	<i>These are being monitored and kept under review.</i>
Personnel consequences	<i>None at present.</i>
Equalities consequences	<i>There is emerging evidence that the crisis has heightened inequality for specific groups across society.</i>
Risk consequences	<i>None at present but being monitored and kept under review.</i>

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