

A mandate to go green?

Public bodies are going to play a key role in the changes needed to reach the UKs 2050 net zero emissions target.

16 June 2020

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Despite the headlines being dominated with Covid 19, one consistent opinion being voiced by government, public bodies, NGOs, members of the public and the private sector is that the rebuilding after the Covid-19 pandemic needs to be green and sustainable.

Parallels can be drawn between the Covid-19 pandemic and climate change; they are both issues which require radical changes on a local, national and an international level to combat them. Professor Cameron Hepburn, Director of the Smith School of Enterprise and the Environment (an interdisciplinary hub of the University of Oxford), has described climate change as like "Covid in slow motion" and hopes that lessons can be learnt from this public health crisis which can be used to tackle the equally severe environmental crisis.

The changes that are needed in order to reach the UKs 2050 net zero emissions target are likely to be radical. Public bodies are going to play a key role, albeit that the precise details of that role are not yet known.

Not everyone has the same view of what a 'green recovery' is going to look like. However common themes include:

1. clean transport and reduced amount of journeys in and out of cities (for example through working from home) - with the primary benefit being clean air in our cities
2. smart, green renewable energy
3. green, energy-efficient, buildings
4. action to support wildlife and biodiversity

Issues such as clean air were focus of local authorities in urban areas prior to Covid 19. However the opportunity presented by Covid 19 to maintain the current drop in air pollution is likely to increase the pressure on local authorities in urban areas to take action before the easing of lockdown sees pollution levels creep up to pre-Covid 19 levels.

Public bodies, in particular local authorities, are in a strong position to pursue other green objectives through the planning system.

This article considers opportunities for public bodies to lead the 'green recovery' in connection with transport.

Future of mobility

Measures announced by government

Public mobility has come into sharp focus during the pandemic with unprecedented levels of people choosing to walk or cycle instead of using public transport; in some areas, there has been a 70% rise in the number of cyclists. In order to encourage and support the public to continue to choose greener forms of travel, particularly as people begin to return to work, the government has announced a [£2 billion investment package](#) to create 'a new era for cycling and walking'.

As part of this package, the government has pledged to fund and work with local authorities across the UK to help make it easier for the public to cycle as a method of travel. For example, there are plans to create a 150 mile cycle track in Greater Manchester and for a 'bike Tube' network to be created above London Underground lines.

In order to facilitate this shift towards greener modes of travel, [the government published statutory guidance](#) on 9 May 2020 under section 18 Traffic Management Act 2004. This guidance, which local authorities must have regard to, provides advice to local authorities on changing their road layouts and reallocating their road space to provide more space for cyclists and pedestrians and to enable social distancing.

Some of the measures detailed in this guidance include:

- using cones and barriers to widen footways along roads;
- reducing speed limits to 20mph on residential roads to provide a safer environment for pedestrians and cyclists;
- introducing pedestrian and cycle zones particularly in town centres;
- using modal filters, such as planters or barriers, to restrict access to motor vehicles, particularly in residential areas; and
- providing additional cycle parking facilities at certain locations, such as on high streets, for example by repurposing parking bays.

Further investment has also been committed to increase the provision of bike fixing facilities and a scheme is expected to be implemented which would issue members of the public with vouchers for bike repairs to encourage people to use older bikes that they may not have used for years.

Emergency legislation (the Traffic Orders Procedure (Coronavirus) (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2020) came into force on 23 May 2020 to temporarily amend The Road Traffic (Temporary Restrictions) Procedure regulations 1992, The Local Authorities' Traffic Orders (Procedure) (England and Wales) Regulations 1996 and The Secretary of State's Traffic Order (Procedure) (England and Wales) Regulations 1990. The effect of these amendments is to simplify and accelerate the process of making a traffic order, which may be needed to install a cycle lane or widen a pavement. These amendments also permit the order to be advertised via a digital platform.

An updated [Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy](#) is expected to be published this summer which will include further measures to transform walking and cycling. The measures include the creation of a national cycling and walking commissioner and inspectorate and the creation of a long-term budget for walking and cycling.

A further way in which the government aims to create greener travel habits is by bringing the trials of e-scooters forward from next year to next month. This trial, coordinated by Andy Street, the Mayor of the West Midlands, intends to help create a more flexible and environmentally friendly travel solution. The role of local authorities in relation to this is unclear, however if e-scooters are able to be used on the transport network, there is likely to be pressure for local authorities to provide suitable infrastructure (for example e-scooters lanes and parking facilities).

Government is also encouraging the public to purchase electric vehicles. The government has pledged an extra £10 million to the on-street residential chargepoint scheme which will allow local authorities to install up to 7,200 charge points to make it more convenient to drive an electric vehicle. The government will also seek to collaborate with the technology sector in relation to rapid charging points in an effort to make charging electric vehicles as easy as filling up with petrol or diesel.

It is likely that more measures will be announced as Covid 19 restrictions are lifted.

A green mandate?

The ability for local authorities to provide green infrastructure and promote green transport is not new. However local authorities often struggle with balancing the views of competing users, some of which are strongly opposed to any restrictions on the use of motor vehicles within cities. Whilst this has not prevented radical transportation solutions, it can make it more difficult and costly.

However the current green rhetoric is notable for its support across the political divide. Whilst differences of opinion as to what a green recovery will look like will obviously be uncovered as local authorities propose green projects; the current focus on green issues increases the ability for radical green projects to be approved. The Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy due to be published this summer might even provide a source of funding for some project.

Final thoughts

As we move from restart to recovery, it is clear that the commitment to tackle climate change has been reaffirmed. Local authorities are expected to play a key role in rebuilding sustainably, with one of their key functions being to implement a long-term shift towards greener travel.

Whilst there appears to be significant support currently for a shift to greener transport, as the Covid 19 related restrictions are lifted and more people are again working and travelling in our city centres, it remains to be seen whether the support for radical green infrastructure (especially if it is at the expense of cars) remains.

There is however an opportunity (and potentially additional government funding) for local authorities to tackle air pollution. Local authorities need to develop appropriate strategies, and take steps to implement them, whilst they have a green mandate to do so.

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