

Implications for road safety from Covid19?

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The Covid19 pandemic has seen the biggest change in travel patterns in recent memory with UK and Scottish Government guidance on only taking essential journeys (by any mode) supported by emergency legislation giving Police forces additional powers to advise and enforce where necessary.

At the Scottish Community Safety Network we've been interested in the impact that the pandemic has had on road safety. We're also keen to explore what the opportunities are to create better road safety outcomes post-pandemic, learning from the pattern of active travel, and collision and injury data during this time as inspiration to "build back better".

Travel patterns and road safety during lockdown

These changes in travel patterns – in particular the fall in car journeys and rise in cycling (and likely walking though we don't have data) – coupled with the significant decreases in air pollution have sparked conversations and campaigns to break car dependency, redesign cities and urban spaces and build a new greener future.

"Many people around the world are currently surrounded by much quieter streets. This presents us with a huge opportunity to re-imagine and lock in a different kind of urban mobility." Paul Chatterton, Professor of Urban Futures, University of Leeds

There have been rapid improvements in active travel and probably in road safety outcomes (future statistical releases on road traffic collisions will give a more definite picture on the safety impact) but this doesn't mean that road safety is of no concern during the pandemic:



- **Speeding** has continued and been made easier in some ways due to quieter roads
- Increased cycle and pedestrian traffic comes with risk: they are still the most **vulnerable road users** and some will be inexperienced.
- **Motorised vehicles**, even though there are fewer of them at the moment, **still pose the highest risk of death and injury** to other road users.
- The emergency legislation **suspended MOTs** for a number of months and, though vehicles are still expected to be 'roadworthy' the absence of this check and balance could mean less safe vehicles are on the road at a time when there is an increase in cyclists and pedestrians.

Despite these, however, we **anticipate that, for the lockdown period both road traffic collisions and resultant injury and fatalities will be much decreased because of the changes in travel patterns.**

So what about the future?

Difficulties with maintaining social distances has ushered in **reallocation of road space** to support social distancing with the increase in pedestrian and cycle traffic at this time. In Scotland this has been supported by £10 million for the 'spaces for everyone' initiative from the Scottish Government for local authorities to use to reallocate road space - work on widening pavements to avoid pinch points especially at pressure times, install pop up cycle lanes, pedestrianise roads and reduce speed limits for example.

This is an emergency measure with anticipated trial and error but already public servants and citizens are seeing the potential to **make some of these changes permanent** and **create a more equitable travel environment in Scotland**. Milan, for example, has announced that it will turn 35km of streets over to cyclists and pedestrians after the crisis.

Streets with fewer cars have shown people what more walkable neighbourhoods would look like. **If we used bikes for short trips rather than cars, for example, lives could be saved¹** (not to mention the improvement in air pollution and associated health improvements).

There are undoubtedly **risks during the transition period as restrictions are eased** – motor vehicles travel will likely increase, some road reallocation may be made permanent (or rolled back) which will take adjusting for all road users and (hopefully) many people will make more active travel choices. The combination of these changes puts "vulnerable road users" at greater exposure to motor vehicles so

¹ Cycling is relatively safe for others, while car driving kills three times as many other people per kilometre as cycling. <https://theconversation.com/road-safety-switch-to-cycling-to-keep-others-safe-131964>

managing the transition (without just retreating to car dependency) is key for national and local governments and communities.

Final word

Being mindful of the requirements of rural communities in Scotland and people with mobility issues, there is an opportunity to move to more active travel in Scotland. Amongst other good things this reduction in motor vehicle traffic would improve road safety in Scotland. Working across portfolios in national and local governments will be needed to balance active travel and road safety with the clear need for people and goods to travel. We hope one need not be at the expense of the others.

We think that place-based approaches in Scotland, coupled with the strong public health and community safety sectors, can support thinking differently about road safety and active travel. With the new Road Safety Framework to 2030 due for consultation shortly (timescales pandemic-permitting) there is an opportunity to **make active travel the focus of road safety efforts** knowing what we know about motor vehicles being the primary driver for road collisions and injuries. Collision and casualty data during lockdown could help illustrate the potential.

We are looking forward to working with our Road Safety Scotland Operational Partnership Group colleagues and community safety and public health partners in Scotland, when appropriate, to explore the opportunity to create a more equitable and safer travel environment. Let's at least start imagining what it could look like!

"It is obviously encouraging to see more people feeling confident to take their bikes out on the roads, so hopefully that helps create more support and demand for safer streets going forward. It's also more important than ever when driving to obey the speed limit, drive to the conditions and give space to people cycling and walking. For road safety and tackling climate change, we all share a mission to promote low carbon transport, which means walking and cycling for shorter trips, and commitment to public transport for longer journeys" Christopher Johnson, Cycling Scotland

Further Reading

Tools such as Google's Community Mobility Reports chart movement trends over time by geography, across different categories of places. It aims to provide insights into what has changed in response to policies aimed at combating COVID-19 and can be provide a way to track return to 'normal' mobility patterns, and how the restrictions may impact on behaviour, and where specific mitigation action may be required, for example, post-pandemic support for public transport.

<https://www.google.com/covid19/mobility/> and download a UK and Local Authority area breakdown https://www.gstatic.com/covid19/mobility/2020-04-30_GB_Mobility_Report_en.pdf.

<https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-were-in-a-real-time-laboratory-of-a-more-sustainable-urban-future-135712>

<https://spice-spotlight.scot/2020/04/14/coronavirus-covid-19-remaking-our-streets/>

<https://www.cycling.scot/mediaLibrary/other/english/7529.pdf>