

Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee Implications of COVID-19 for the Scottish budget related to connectivity and the rural economy

Cycling Scotland submission September 2020

Introduction

Cycling Scotland welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Committee's call for evidence.

The current Covid-19 pandemic has led to fundamental changes in travel patterns and behaviours. The importance of sustainable travel and the possibilities around reducing travel have been highlighted. There has been a significant increase in the number of people cycling across Scotland, and this is welcome. A key facilitator of this has been the significant reduction of cars and vehicles on the roads. This has helped to improve air quality and reduce emissions and has significantly increased feelings of safety for people cycling.

We welcome the support given to local authorities to introduce temporary cycling and walking infrastructure to support people to travel actively for essential journeys during the lockdown. Evidence from a recent survey we carried out highlights the importance of dedicated separated infrastructure to encourage cycling, with more than a quarter of survey respondents stating that dedicated cycle paths would be the most likely factor to encourage them to keep cycling after the lockdown¹. In this regard, in response to the current pandemic, there is a need to ensure that transport infrastructure decision-making and spending takes into account the need to support physical distancing for active travel and public transport, both now and in response to future pandemics. This includes space allocation decisions and ensuring sufficient footway and cycle path width.

Public transport and active travel

There are challenges for connectivity in rural areas, particularly for sustainable transport options. The pandemic and emergence from lockdown has and will continue to put pressure on public transport, which is already limited in some rural areas, to support the need for physical distancing, and has raised concerns that journeys previously undertaken by public transport will instead be replaced by individual car journeys. This in turn has a range of negative consequences including increased congestion, increased greenhouse gas emissions and worsening air quality, and a reduction in the amount of physical space available for active travel. The recovery of public transport post-crisis will be challenging, particularly for bus services in many rural areas. Cycling and active travel has an important role to play in these areas to help improve connectivity.

Budgetary decisions should be taken to support increased connectivity to public transport and active travel options in rural communities, to make these viable and convenient options. Currently in many rural communities, the car is seen as the only viable option to meet every day travel needs. Spending should be focused on changing this, supporting modal shift from

¹ <https://www.cycling.scot/news-article/new-lockdown-cycling-survey>

driving to public transport and more active modes. The Scottish Infrastructure Commission, in their interim report, outlined a recommendation that for road infrastructure, there should be a presumption in favour of investment to future proof existing road infrastructure and to make it safer, resilient and more reliable, rather than increase road capacity². We support this recommendation and feel it needs to be considered with regards to improving connectivity in rural areas. Transport budgetary decisions should prioritise active and sustainable transport, rather than continue to prioritise expanding existing road capacity.

Limiting investment in expanding road capacity is crucial for climate change, air pollution, road safety, health and social inclusion objectives and is required if desired levels of modal shift to active travel and public transport are to be achieved. If this is not done, carbon and greenhouse gas emissions will continue to be locked into the transport system and infrastructure decision-making and budgetary commitments, further increasing the reliance of rural communities on cars and road infrastructure.

To achieve modal shift to cycling and active travel, there is a need to create coherent networks of safe, easy to access separated cycling infrastructure. This includes cohesive, comprehensive, and seamless networks of on-road dedicated cycling routes, linking communities in rural areas with off-road paths. The focus should be on shorter distance journeys, generally up to 10 miles (rather than up to 5 miles in urban areas), in rural areas.

Electric bikes (e-bikes) have an important role to play in improving connectivity in rural and remote areas, where the car may currently be the only option. E-bikes can facilitate longer journeys that may previously have been unable to have been cycled, and enable users to overcome obstacles such as headwinds and hills. This can enable someone living in a rural area to cycle for everyday journeys, that are likely to be of a greater distance than in urban areas, without relying on a car. Going forward, to emerge and recover from the pandemic, there should be action in future budget decisions to support increased access to and facilities to support the use of e-bikes in rural areas. Such support could include e-bike loans, e-bike libraries, and workplace pool e-bikes.

Green recovery

Ensuring a green recovery after Covid-19 to build a wellbeing economy is a key commitment of the Scottish Government, and budgetary decisions need to support this.

There has been a significant reduction in car journeys during the lockdown period, which has led to improvements in air quality and reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. Positively, there has been a significant increase in the number of people cycling; however, there has also been a corresponding decrease in the number of people using public transport, which has an important role to play in decarbonising transport and delivering the Sustainable Transport Hierarchy. As we move forward in the transition out of lockdown, it is important that the gains in improved air quality and increased levels of cycling are not reversed by a return to pre-pandemic or even higher levels of motorised transport. This is particularly relevant for rural areas, where car use is likely to already be higher. Such action is essential to ensure a green recovery. Cycling and active travel has a key role in achieving an effective green recovery and transition to net-zero emissions, can help to address the overwhelming challenges of the climate emergency, and improve connectivity in rural areas.

² Scottish Infrastructure Commission (2020) Phase 1: Key findings report. A blueprint for Scotland https://infrastructurecommission.scot/storage/238/ExecutiveSummary_160120.pdf

Tourism recovery

The (rural) tourism sector has suffered significantly from Covid-19. Many rural areas in Scotland are cycling tourism hotspots and are frequently visited by tourists cycling. As a result, cycling has a key role to play in supporting tourism recovery in rural areas and this should be recognised in budgetary decisions.

Additionally, evidence shows that people walking and cycling in an area spend more money than those who drive and visit more often³. Increasing cycling and walking facilities in an area can stimulate economic growth and benefit local businesses, both from local trade and tourism.

³ British Cycling (2014) Benefits of Investing in Cycling
https://www.britishcycling.org.uk/zuvvi/media/bc_files/campaigning/BENEFITS_OF_INVESTING_IN_CYCLING_DIGI_FINAL.pdf