

We'll soon know which elements of the new normal are here to stay – John Yellowlees

By The transport and logistics rule book is being torn up, but we'll be ready to meet the challenges ahead, writes John Yellowlees

Friday, 19th June 2020, 7:30 am



Many Scots have acquired a taste for cycling during lockdown, but if this active travel revolution is to be sustained road space will need to be reallocated for safety reasons (Picture: Justin Tallis/AFP via Getty Images)

What a difference a year can make, and none more for so than for future students of newspaper headlines contrasting 2019 with 2020.

Then as now one issue dominated the media, and Brexit has not gone away so to neglect it would be at our peril. However the new vocabulary of 2020 is all about Covid-19, the worst pandemic to have swept the planet in a century, bringing the language of epidemiology into everyday use as we have locked down into a world of shielding, social distancing and the R Number.

Last year when politicians referred to PPE they were fondly recalling their undergraduate days at Oxford studying Politics, Philosophy and Economics. Logisticians rejoiced in a global supply-chain that would bring everyday elements of our lives along a new Silk Road from China. Quarantine was just for pets as Scottish airports welcomed bigger aircraft on more routes bringing tourists from all over the world to stay in our high-end hotels, enjoy our locally-sourced fare and attend our events that threatened to outstrip the capacity of hotspots like Edinburgh to accommodate them – while cruise-liners delivered thousands to places like Greenock, Invergordon and Orkney, prompting calls for a new terminal on the Forth. Just a few of arriving tourists wore face masks that echoed health concerns in the Far East.



John Yellowlees, Scottish chair CILT.

Last year too politicians were still judged on the success of their transport policies by the success with which they persuaded us to forsake our cars in the fight against climate change, and commuting for most still meant a five-day-a-week trek to the office.

Investment in active travel such as segregated cycle-lanes was seen as a leap of faith, and while there was already concern about Scotland's most popular mode of public transport the bus, train companies were bringing in new fleets and routes.

Retail was pursuing a route that it had been on for several years, with corner shops getting by and growth in online sales prompting gentle concern for the decline of the high street and the threat to its big names. Scotland's universities were thriving, with students pouring in from overseas and staff shuttling between campuses at home and away.

Fast forward to 2020's new normal, in which the private car is now hailed as the safest mode of transport and families who drive to beauty spots as lockdown eases may find a lack of eating-places and toilets. The future of public transport is at risk while social distancing reduces capacity to a quarter or less, but the revolution in active travel may have already occurred as Scots, encouraged in lockdown to give cycling a go, acquired a taste for it that will require reallocation of road space to maintain safety.

The shift to online retail has received a mighty boost during enforced closure of high street stores, and convenience stores became the daily destination for many of us during our daily exercise. Supply chains have also had to move vast quantities of products newly in vogue such as hand-sanitiser, face-masks, gowns and scrubs, while who again might want to place reliance of their production lines on basic components from far away.

Learning too has changed, with lectures going online for social distancing and face-to-face tutorials made more difficult if the student is working from home in another continent.

Now, as never before, organisations like the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport are needed to monitor which elements of the new normal are just short-term or are here to stay.

We too are having to adapt from the luxury of occasional face-to-face networking into the urgency of ongoing online contact and reassurance, and our new community platform enables members to receive on their smartphones daily digests of conversations in their chosen areas of interest, allowing people to keep up to date and make contacts at the cutting edge of our strange new world.

John Yellowlees, Scottish chair, CILT