

Tourism's worst year could be chance to re-evaluate our transport priorities

Survival of businesses across entire transport sector is essential for post-pandemic recovery of Scotland's economy, says **Ken Thomson**



In 2020 the business implications of Coronavirus became apparent very quickly – and it was soon realised that industries at the heart of Scotland's service-based economy were facing an existential threat.

The United Nations' World Trade Organisation (UNWTO) would describe 2020 as "the worst year in tourism history", and messages which had encouraged responsible travel behaviour were reversed as passengers were asked to avoid public transport, advice that would have been unthinkable in the pre-pandemic era.

The decline in transport usage was stark. Demand in Scotland fell by 50 per cent overall, and by 90 per cent for public transport. Travel to Scotland shrank just as rapidly – between April and September 2020 Edinburgh Airport passenger numbers fell to 785,000, a decline of over 90 per cent from the 2019 figure of 8.4 million.

'Recovery' is the challenge now facing transport operators. However, the landscape for transport companies has changed irrevocably. Just as the way people work has changed, so too has the way they travel to work.

Active travel is in the spotlight; more space is being given to cycle lanes and even e-scooter trials are now on the agenda.

The car however still dominates as the first choice for private journeys, accounting for 66 per cent of all trips in Scotland. Significantly, it is the default option for the domestic market on which tourism companies are now depending for recovery.

Those businesses are also facing a very different environment with 41 per cent of the UNWTO's Panel of Tourism Experts predicting that it will be 2024 (or later) before international tourism demand recovers to 2019 levels.

The re-opening of borders across the UK and Ireland Common Travel Area (CTA) is essen-

tial for tourism, as the 'home holiday' market within Scotland has always been weak by comparison with other countries.

VisitScotland data suggests that Scottish residents made 1.41 holiday trips per person in 2019, below the average number of trips made by (for example) residents in the Republic of Ireland (2.37 per person). Without being able to cater for demand generated across Britain and Ireland, the outlook for Scottish tourism would be daunting.

So what does a revival in domestic tourism mean for transport operators?

On the supply side the closure of well-known domestic travel companies was blamed on the collapse in demand.

For public transport operators government funding off-set revenue shortfalls, but as that support is reduced will demand recover sufficiently to prevent the imbalance between income and costs from deteriorating further?

For companies serving the tourism industry and relying on discretionary demand the outlook was much less certain, although some relief was provided in December 2020 when the Scottish Government announced a funding package (including a £10m fund to support coach operators) to help tourism and hospitality businesses survive the pandemic.

However the survival of businesses right across the entire transport sector is essential if the post-pandemic recovery of Scotland's economy, including its tourism sector, is to be truly equitable.

The private car is not an option for 30 per cent of Scottish households, and "the worst year in tourism history" could yet be the best opportunity for the re-evaluation of investment priorities in transport.

Ken Thomson is a Past Chair of CLT Scottish Region and a visiting lecturer at the University of Stirling

Leaping to the aid of the mountain hare



Volunteer 'citizen scientist' asked to help develop a broader picture of status of mountain hares, writes **Ross Macleod**

Volunteers are being sought for the first on-the-ground national survey to find out more about the state of the mountain hare population across Scotland.

The survey, launched in March, is urging as many hillwalkers, amateur naturalists and outdoor enthusiasts as possible to take part. No previous experience is necessary to get involved.

The mountain hare – *Lepus timidus* – Scotland's only native hare and Great Britain's only native lagomorph, is an important species in the Scottish hills. But counting them can be challenging, and gathering accurate information is important to target conservation efforts. They are also distinctive as their fur changes colour from winter to summer.

Beyond the UK, mountain hares have a very wide, virtually circumpolar distribution extending throughout the tundra regions of eastern and northern Europe, with the closely related Arctic hare (*Lepus arcticus*) in Canada and Alaska. A world-wide pattern of restriction by both habitat and other species of hare explains the distribution of the mountain hare within Britain.

After the introduction of the brown hare to England in Roman times, mountain hares became restricted to upland regions where they were able to hold their own, feeding on heather and other moorland plants, while the brown hares fed on lowland grasses and agricultural crops. By the early 19th century mountain hares were found only in the Scottish Highlands.

Towards the middle/end of the 19th century, accompanying the development of grouse shooting and the management of heather for grouse, some landowners released mountain hares

across the remaining British uplands. Many of these re-introduced populations have died out, leaving the large core populations in the Scottish Highlands, a well-established population in the Southern Uplands and a small one in the Peak District. The population in northern Wales has probably died out in the last two decades. The most recent estimate suggests that there are approximately 135,000 hares across this range.

In recent years however, there has been concern about the state of the mountain hare population in Scotland and the possible effects of control measures in some upland areas. Available sources of information present a mixed picture of their conservation status, making it difficult to draw firm conclusions on population size and trends. The picture is further complicated by their naturally cycling populations, which can fluctuate quite dramatically over periods of about four to 15 years.

As mountain hares are more active after dusk, the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust has developed a night-time counting approach that is used chiefly on managed moorland, but this method is not suitable or even advisable in other areas of Scotland, particularly for reasons of safety. The extension of survey work to daylight 'citizen science' approaches and encouraging members of the public to submit reports of sightings and numbers will help to develop a broader picture of mountain hare status across its whole Scottish range, alongside understanding the influence of different land uses and managements.

This project is a partnership of NatureScot, the British Trust for Ornithology, the Mammal Society, the



Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust and the James Hutton Institute. It builds on previous work to develop better counting methods and seeks to complement these other counts to allow improved monitoring of mountain hares across their range in Scotland. Volunteers will need a smartphone with the recently upgraded free Mammal Mapper app to participate. Participants can sign up online through the

British Trust for Ornithology website and access support materials on how to identify hares and also some optional upland bird species: www.bto.org/our-science/projects/volunteer-mountain-hare-survey

The survey information will be collated and verified by the British Trust for Ornithology and the Mammal Society. **Ross Macleod, Head of Policy Scotland, Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust**

↑ The mountain hare – *Lepus timidus* – Scotland's only native hare and Great Britain's only native lagomorph.



Let's stop trying to muddle through on housing

Now is the time for an open and frank conversation about what the private rented sector should look like in the future, says **John Blackwood**



By the time this piece is published, we will be well in to an election campaign with housing at the forefront. We have already seen promises on numbers of new affordable homes and how many should be for social rent. The topic that is explicitly avoided, however, is how large, or small, any of the political parties believe the private rented sector should be.

The Scottish Household Survey shows us that between 1999 and 2019, the number of people in social housing fell from 32 per cent to 24 per cent, whilst the size of the private rented sector grew by almost the mirror of that, from five per cent to 14 per cent. There was no policy decision or vision that envisaged that move, it was simply allowed to happen and saw private landlords step in to a void left by a reduction in social housing.

That lack of a grand vision for the composition of the housing sector has led to a messy fudge. In the private rented sector, successive governments have playing catch-up and pulling policy levers, adding regulations and improving standards on the fly. Fine, that is how a lot of policy works. But with an area as critical as housing and its impact on so many other services, is muddling through really the right approach?

It has led to private landlords feeling victimised despite the investments they have made to maintain and upgrade properties, investments that likely would not otherwise have been made. At the same time, individuals and families feeling rail-roaded in to becoming private tenants simply because there are no other options available to them. That is no way to plan a housing system.

Instead of repeating that mistake and attempting to muddle through for another decade, now is the time for an open and frank conversation about what the private rented sector should look like in the future, what market it should serve and how it should be regulated.

For example, the next Scottish Government of whatever political colour is likely to want to massively increase social housing. Does that mean they want to reduce the private rented sector to providing homes only at the upper ends of the price spectrum? That is a perfectly legitimate policy goal, but let's make that explicit and allow the whole housing sector to input and plan for the role they will play in moving towards that goal.

The Scottish Association of Landlords wants to be part of that conversation. We don't want to see the endless expansion of the private rented sector. We want it to play the right role in Scotland's housing mix.

In order to accomplish that, I believe there are three key questions the next Scottish Government must address in a frank and open fashion: What is the target mix between social house/private rented housing/owner-occupied homes and how quickly can that be achieved? Which market is the private rented sector expected to service? Without investment from landlords how can we make sure existing housing stock is improved, particularly to help meet ambitious carbon reduction targets?

There are answers to all of these questions and private landlords can adapt and play a role in all scenarios but we must stop muddling through and be honest about what housing in Scotland will really look like in 2040. **John Blackwood, Scottish Association of Landlords**

The Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport

Young adults missed out on biggest milestones during pandemic

Now growing fears about post-pandemic finances among young adults, says **Malcolm Buchanan**

As we enter our thirteenth month in lockdown, it's a chance to reflect on the year that wasn't for many.

While we are making tentative but encouraging steps forward, the impact of the pandemic on people's lives has been colossal.

Continual studies, research, and daily conversations with customers, colleagues, family, and friends illustrate the huge scale that Covid-19 has imposed, from the impacts on mental wellbeing, big life moments, small life moments, livelihoods, and our economy.

Millions around the country have been affected to an unprecedented level. In particular, we have identified a series of societal and financial concerns amongst the 'Covid-generation', an assembly of young adults who were

teetering on the edge of the biggest milestones of their lives only to have them put on hold; from graduation ceremonies forced into the confines of a Zoom formality, wedding celebrations with only two, plans to purchase first homes threatened, or travel plans ground to a halt.

While the injustice of missing out on these moments will linger, the emotional and financial implications they have triggered is significant. Recent research conducted by Royal Bank revealed that almost a quarter of young Scots (24 per cent) aged 18-34 are anxious about recovering personal relationships and 28 per cent have concerns about seeing people in 'real life' again.

Our study also identified growing fears among young adults thinking about their finances in a post-pandemic world, with over a fifth (22 per cent) admitting they feel anxious about future money troubles caused by Covid-19.

It's why we've partnered with award-winning rapper Shaheeda Sinckler, 25, who, under her stage name Nova Scotia the Truth, became the youngest ever winner of the Scottish Album of the Year (SAY) 2020 award last year. Shaheeda, like other young adults in Scotland, has faced the unpredictability of lockdown life; moving back home with her parents, being placed on furlough from her day job, attending college virtually – and even picking up her SAY award via Zoom. However, unlike many, she's spent the extra time also getting her finances in order, making small steps to set up savings goals and plans for her money.

Shaheeda's story has shown that the pandemic has impacted everyone, whether in the public eye or not, and we hope our partnership and her reassuring voice will encourage younger generations to start talking more about money worries and recognise the importance of having a financial plan.

This next generation is vital to the future of our economy and we want to support them every step of the way. With the country taking its first steps towards re-opening, Royal Bank has committed to improving the nation's

financial capabilities by offering every person a free Financial Health Check, to reduce money anxieties and help them achieve their goals. Taking small steps to improve our financial wellbeing can support long term plans, and I believe banks can be the gateway to equip people with the tools to live financially sustainable futures.

Malcolm Buchanan, Chair, Scotland Board at Royal Bank of Scotland

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