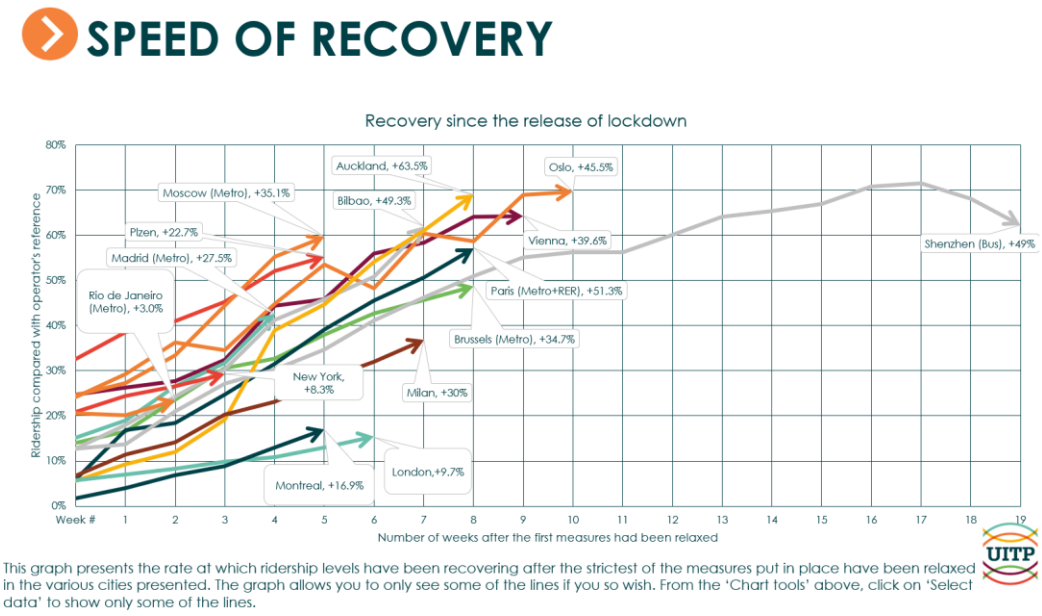
Return to Public Transport: International Comparisons

3 July 2020

- In London, 49% of commuters usually travel to work by public transport. More than four in ten workers in the capital are categorised as "less able to work from home" by the Institute for Fiscal Studies and these workers are disproportionately lower paid[1].
- There is no risk-free return to public transport. As a result, encouraging the public back onto public transport will require both **comprehensive mitigation measures** and **communication to build confidence** among the travelling public. **SPACE**, **VENTILATION**, and **CLEANLINESS** are the key areas on which to focus.
- The latest data from the International Association of Public Transport (UITP) shows[2]:



  - During lockdown the reduction in public transport use in London was among the most severe (along with Auckland, Montreal, Milan, and Paris);
  - Cities follow a fairly predictable trajectory once they unlock with most seeing at least 1 in 5 of their usual ridership who had abandoned public transport returning within the first month, and somewhere between a third and two-thirds having returned within the first two months;
  - London and New York (and perhaps Rio de Janeiro although they are earlier in the unlocking timeline) are outliers in this trend and seeing noticeably slower returns to public transport (perhaps indicating lower levels of confidence amongst the travelling public about the extent to which the pandemic has been brought under control); and

[1] https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/Final-BN287-Changes-down-the-line-Flattening-the-curve-of-public-transport-use.pdf

[2] The percentages shown in the labels are percentage point changes (relative to the operator's pre-pandemic baseline) not percentage increases.

    - No city within this comparison set has yet managed to convince more than 70% of their pre-pandemic ridership to return to the network (with the brief exception of the Shenzhen buses which have subsequently dropped again).
- Transport for London and rail operators are already implementing a number of the **CLEANLINESS** mitigations recommended in a new paper from the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change (TBIGC)[3] including mandatory mask wearing, making hand sanitiser available, and enhancing cleaning regimes. Different countries are taking different approaches (for example, Shanghai is using UV light to clean buses whilst Verona is using dry steam at 180 degrees Celsius) and London's approach must be – and be seen to be – best-in-class. However, **operators do not feel empowered to run full-throated public information campaigns about these measures for fear of being seen to be promoting travel on public transport, contrary to Government guidance.** Building public confidence in these mitigation measures is critical and, along with general confidence about the current state of the virus in the city, may help to explain why London and New York lag international comparators. Operators should take a more proactive and comprehensive PPE (such as face shields) for frontline staff.
- There are few remaining "quick wins" for operators but those that do exist are mostly in the realm of **SPACE**. Returning services to pre-pandemic levels should remain a priority for operators. Additional signage for both distancing and flow management will be essential as passenger numbers increase. Technology could enable demand responsive bus services and provide data about loading levels in arriving rail carriages. Greater use of advance ticketing may become necessary. Most concerningly, however, there is **a noticeable gap in the current plans where an extensive and well-coordinated programme of demand management should be.** If London is truly going to get back to work there needs to be a military-style planning operation with transport operators and employers working in lockstep to reduce and retime commutes across the city. This does not appear to be being gripped at present.
- TBIGC has described the tube as presenting "the biggest difficultly in terms of mitigating the potential spread of Covid-19", whilst buses and trains can in some cases benefit from windows and regular door opening to provide increased **VENTILATION**. Given the expectation that the "new normal" will exist for an extended period of time, **urgent attention should be given to longer-term solutions such as unsealing and retrofitting openable windows on buses and trains, and where practicable fitting air filtration systems.**

[3] https://institute.global/policy/pandemic-proofing-travel