

Changing travel habits and what they mean for future transport trends

Introduction

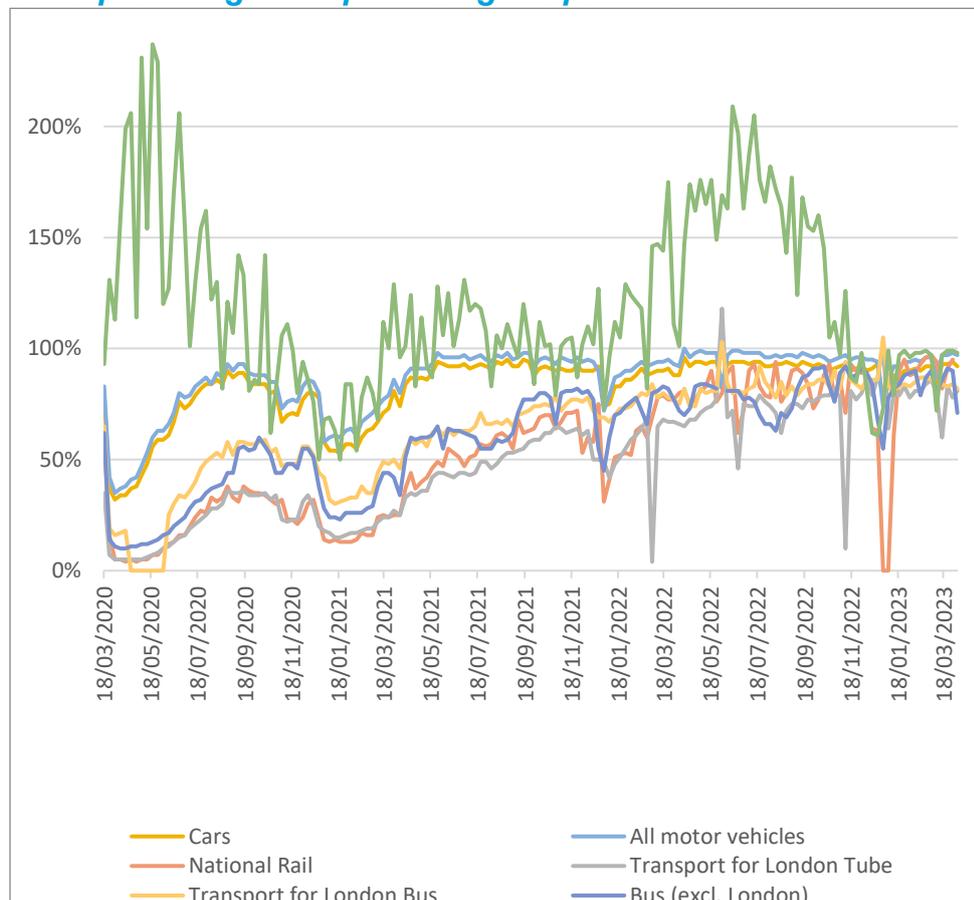
The aim of this briefing is to explore some of the background factors that are driving current transport trends, and what these might mean for the patronage recovery moving forwards.

2022 and 2023 have provided a relatively stable period in terms of there being no government pandemic restrictions in place. This has enabled travel patterns to recover and for people to establish their work, shopping and leisure habits. The question now is whether we have reached the ‘new normal’ or whether we are still experiencing a slow recovery.

However, there are still considerable external forces which may continue to impact how and when we travel, particularly the cost-of-living crisis and high levels of inflation that we face.

Looking at how patronage has returned at the national level:

Transport usage as a percentage of pre-Covid 19 levels



Nationally, bus has recovered to around 80-90% of pre-pandemic patronage, a range which is reflected across the UTG membership. The patronage recovery has been slower in London than some other areas of the country.

Rail has seen a similar recovery. Having lagged behind bus for a period of time, a stronger return to the office and city centres has seen rail patronage back to 90-95% of pre-covid levels.

Light rail presents a varied picture across the membership, with networks serving very different roles in the local transport network. However, some light rail networks have now reached pre-pandemic levels, with particularly strong weekend patronage.

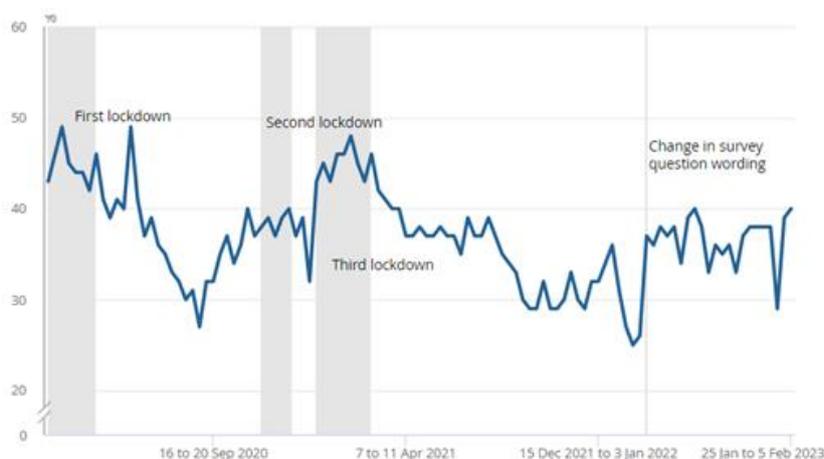
Road traffic is now close to pre-pandemic levels. Car traffic is generally between 92-97% of pre-Covid levels, but Light Goods and Heavy Goods traffic is above pre-Covid levels.

The following sections will now explore some of the key drivers of these trends.

Return to the office

The first lockdown in the spring of 2020 had an enormous impact on the number of people suddenly having to work from home. Whilst the proportion of jobs able to be undertaken from home had been increasing, there was a sudden surge as people were pushed out of offices, with a peak of 50% of people working from home. Whilst this figure has gradually fallen away, it is estimated that there are still 40% of people working at least some of the week from home.

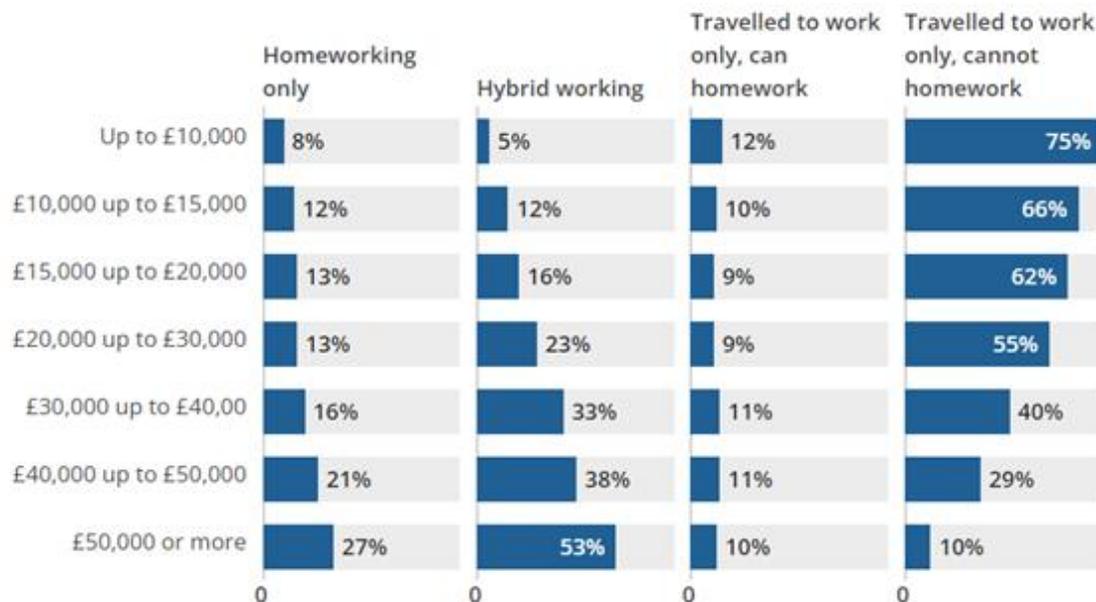
The proportion of working adults in Great Britain who work from home, March 2020 to February 2023¹.



¹ [Characteristics of homeworkers, Great Britain - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](https://ons.gov.uk)

The impact of working from home has not been even across society, with higher paid jobs, and those with higher levels of education, generally more likely to have the option to work from home.

The proportion of working adults in Great Britain who work from home by income, September 2022 to January 2023².



The most recent survey by the ONS estimated that 16% of people are currently solely working from home, with 28% of people working a hybrid week. London has seen a slower return to the office, with 40% of people still estimated to be working a hybrid week³.

The impact of the change in working patterns has not been even across all modes of public transport, with heavily used commuter modes and networks most likely to be affected.

“Commuters who used a train, underground, metro, light rail, or tram were most likely to be hybrid workers. Of those who travelled to work by train, 64% were hybrid workers and of those who used underground, metro, light rail, or tram services, 65% were hybrid workers. With London reporting the highest levels of hybrid working in Great Britain, it follows that train, underground, metro, light rail, and tram services were the most popular for hybrid workers.

² [Characteristics of homeworkers, Great Britain - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](https://ons.gov.uk)

³ [Characteristics of homeworkers, Great Britain - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](https://ons.gov.uk)

For all other types of transport (bus, minibus, coach, car or car-pooling, van, motorcycle, scooter, moped, bicycle, on foot or other) the most frequent users were not hybrid workers but those who travelled to work and did not have the option to work from home”.⁴

Modes with a higher share of hybrid and home workers face a significant challenge to get back to pre-pandemic patronage levels.

Recent research has found that:

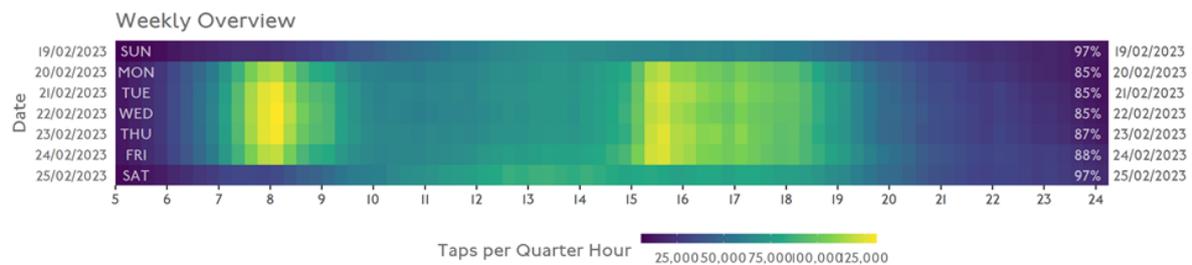
“There has been growth in office occupancy levels, with occupancy levels reaching 34.3% in the fourth week of January, the highest level since monitoring began in May 2021 (according to a survey by Remit Consulting, which collects property data).”⁵

Prior to the pandemic, normal office occupancy varied between 60-80%, so the current levels represent a significant downturn.

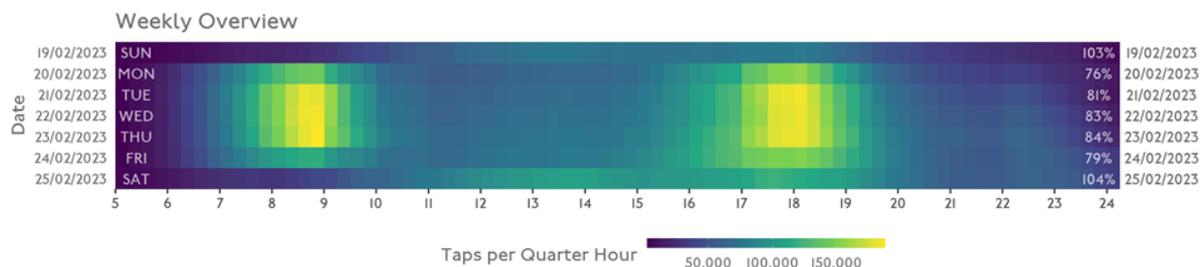
It seems that many people have returned to the office in the middle of the week with The Times stating that “the vast majority of whom have full offices on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays”. This is backed up by TfL data for both bus and tube, which show a reduced number of boardings in the Monday and Friday peaks.

TfL Taps per quarter hour by day of the week⁶

Bus



Tube



⁴ [Characteristics of homeworkers, Great Britain - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](https://ons.gov.uk)

⁵ [Offices get busier 'with workers fed up at home' \(thetimes.co.uk\).](https://thetimes.co.uk)

⁶ TfL Passenger demand report

Research is emerging that the regions with the easiest commutes are leading the return to the office, with longer or more difficult commutes being seen as a barrier to increasing the number of days people are willing to work from their place of employment:

Mark Dixon, 63, the boss of [IWG, the serviced offices group](#), said last year that “the enemy is commuting” rather than the office itself⁷.

However, the experience of London (which has an extensive public transport network) possibly goes against this suggestion.

How have our shopping habits changed?

Shopping is one of the key drivers of public transport usage, with 22% of bus trips being undertaken for this purpose⁸. However, shopping trips have declined over time as the proportion of shopping undertaken online has increased (20% of all retail sales in 2019). The pandemic accelerated the move to shop online, with levels peaking at over 35% through the initial lockdowns. However, there has been a subsequent decline, although it is too early to say if this will go far enough to reverse the impact of Covid-19⁹.

Internet sales as a percentage of total retail sales¹⁰



A recent survey by MRI Springboard has found that although footfall at key retail destinations is at the highest level it has been since the Covid-19 pandemic, it is still 14.5% down across UK retail destinations, with central London destinations remaining 19.7% down¹¹.

⁷ [Regions with easier commutes lead office return \(thetimes.co.uk\)](#)

⁸ National Travel survey table NTS0409. Data taken from 2019

⁹ [Internet sales as a percentage of total retail sales \(ratio\) \(%\) - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#)

¹⁰ [Internet sales as a percentage of total retail sales \(ratio\) \(%\) - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#)

¹¹ [Springboard: City Centre High Streets Boosted As Workers Return To The Office - Retail Times](#)

Work from home accounts for some of the reduction in high street footfall, with less people travelling into our city centres than on a ‘normal’ pre-pandemic day. Cities with the lowest return to work, such as London, also have the slowest return to the high street.

During 2022, UK shopping footfall was 11.8% below the pre-pandemic figure for 2019, but was 15.1% higher than 2021. The high street had seen the largest increase in 2022, with footfall up 19.7% when compared to 2021. This compares to an increase of 13.4% for shopping centres and a decrease of 1.6% at retail parks. This partly reflects that shopping centres and retail parks had seen a stronger recovery than the high street in 2021¹².

Looking at the most recent figures available, the recovery has continued, but is still below the 2019 level¹³.

Weekly footfall change by shopping location¹⁴

Week beginning 05/02/2023 (Sunday to Saturday)

| | Year on year % change in footfall – 2023 vs 2022 | Week on week % change in footfall | % change in footfall – 2023 vs 2019 |
|---------------------|--|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| All UK Destinations | 9.1% | 1.6% | -14.5% |
| UK High Streets | 13.0% | 2.4% | -16.8% |
| UK Retail Parks | 1.3% | 0.9% | -5.3% |
| UK Shopping Centres | 8.4% | 0.8% | -18.5% |

UK retail parks have seen the strongest return of footfall compared to pre-pandemic levels. However, retail parks are often out of town and are more likely to be difficult to be served by public transport when compared to the high street, meaning that the impact of reduced footfall on public transport is more likely to be in line with the return to the high street.

Cost of living and the impact on travel habits

Transport demand is inextricably linked to wider economic factors which generate the demand for travel. With the current cost of living crisis, many people are facing challenging financial times and are having to cut back on some activities. Where this is the case, the cost of living crisis has the ability to impact on patronage demand.

¹² [Visitors return to UK shops at their highest rate since before Covid-19: BRC - Internet Retailing](#)

¹³ [Springboard: city centre high streets boosted as workers return to the office - Retail Times](#)

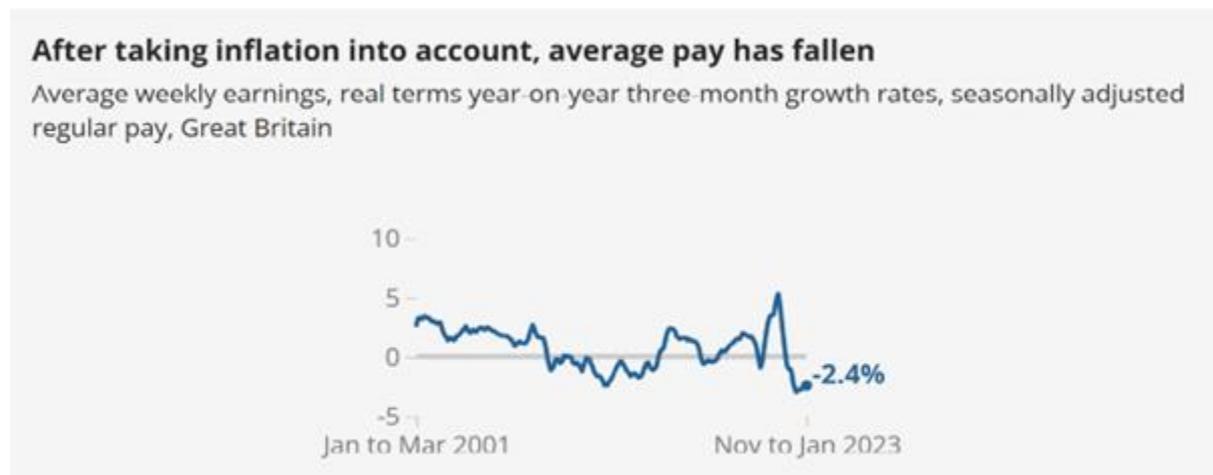
¹⁴ [Springboard: city centre high streets boosted as workers return to the office - Retail Times](#)

Recent work by the Resolution Foundation found that 45% of respondents were quite worried or very worried about their energy bills over the winter months, rising to 63% of workers in the bottom income quintile¹⁵.

One in five are not confident about their finances over the next few months, rising to 32% of those in the bottom income quintile.

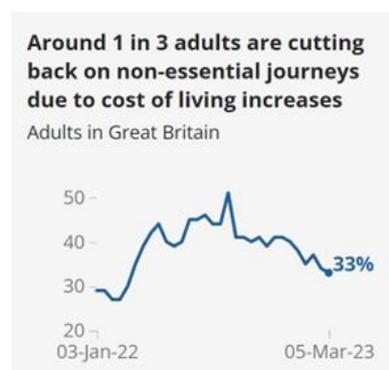
Although inflation is expected to fall over the next year, real wage levels have fallen over recent months, meaning that people will have less money available than previously¹⁶.

Average GB wage growth over time¹⁷



The impact of this is that one in three people are looking to cut back on non-essential trips, a fall from around 50% in August 2022. However, this still presents a significant challenge for our transport networks¹⁸.

The percentage of people cutting back on non-essential journeys¹⁹



¹⁵ [The Living Standards Outlook 2023 • Resolution Foundation](#)

¹⁶ [Cost of living insights - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#)

¹⁷ [Cost of living insights - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#)

¹⁸ [Cost of living insights - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#)

¹⁹ [Cost of living insights - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#)

Non-essential journeys (often shopping or leisure trips) make up around 50%²⁰ of all trips, meaning that any cuts to non-essential travel could have a significant impact on patronage.

However, it is not possible to say to what extent this will impact on public transport patronage. Although cost pressures will largely impact on the trips people make in a negative way, there may be some pull from modes such as the car where public transport is the most cost effective option. Reduced price single and day tickets have been introduced by many combined authorities and DfT to help make bus travel more attractive as a cost of living measure. In this sense, the cost of living crisis presents both a challenge and an opportunity for public transport. However, people still need the reason to travel if this is to have a positive impact on patronage.

Poor reliability and industrial action

Public transport users have experienced a high level of disruption during 2022 and early 2023. The cuts to bus and (to some extent) rail have started to impact on the networks, limiting travel options. However, there has also been persistent industrial action impacting on services, as well as more general reliability issues due to factors such as bus driver shortages. These factors have come together to limit the patronage recovery as we move towards the new normal.

Industrial action has both a short-term impact (changing people's daily travel patterns and impacting on patronage) and also a longer-term impact (potential to lose people to other modes). This has compounded other issues, such as poor performance of some train operators, a bus driver shortage, reductions to networks, meaning that people are not able to rely on public transport to get them to work.

Where people must be at a place of work, or do not want to work from home, poor reliability or the removal of services means that they must look for another way to travel. UK Government research into the impact of the rail strikes found that 24% of passengers said they would stop using the train if the strikes went on for an extended period²¹. This answer was most prevalent amongst the most frequent travellers.

Research by Transport Focus has repeatedly found that punctuality and reliability are two of the key factors that drive passenger satisfaction²². Recent research into rail passengers found that the most common responses to a strike included using another mode of transport, or cancelling your plans²³. Nearly half of people reported trying to avoid the train whilst the strikes were ongoing, with 28% saying they would

²⁰ Non-essential trips have been calculated using the National Travel Survey table NTS9906. We have based the calculation on trips for the purpose of: shopping, personal business, visit friends at private home, visit friends elsewhere, sport/entertainment, holiday/day trip.

²¹ [Rail strikes: understanding the impact on passengers – summary findings - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/research-data-and-analysis/rail-strikes-understanding-the-impact-on-passengers-summary-findings)

²² [What drives bus passenger satisfaction \(d3cez36w5wymxi.cloudfront.net\)](https://d3cez36w5wymxi.cloudfront.net/what-drives-bus-passenger-satisfaction)

²³ [Rail strikes: impact on passengers \(d3cez36w5wymxi.cloudfront.net\)](https://d3cez36w5wymxi.cloudfront.net/rail-strikes-impact-on-passengers)

be reluctant to go back even when the strikes are over²⁴. Even if only a small proportion of people follow through with this action it will make the task of growing patronage even more difficult.

At a time when we are trying to encourage people back onto public transport, any barrier to achieving this will clearly impact on future patronage levels.

What does this suggest for travel trends going forwards?

Travel patterns have been relatively stable for a period of time following the constant flux caused by Covid-19 and the subsequent lockdowns and restrictions. However, the cost of living crisis and industrial relations, particularly on bus and rail, have created additional uncertainties as we have transitioned into a new normal.

This leaves open the question as to whether we have now reached the new normal, or whether we are still on a slow path to recovery. This needs to be considered when planning transport networks and funding to ensure they are given the chance to recover. If adjustments to service levels are made too early, these changes may act against any slow recovery which is occurring.

What does this suggest going forwards?

- It is still too early to say whether we have reached the 'new normal' or whether transport networks are still experiencing a slow recovery.
- However, it is still looking difficult for public transport patronage to get back to pre-pandemic levels on a broad scale.
- Work from home is here to stay, with only a minority of people returning to their place of work full time, where they have a choice.
- Inflation and the cost of living are impacting on the disposable income that people have and the decisions that they are making. This creates additional uncertainty around public transport patronage going forwards.
- The patronage recovery has been further complicated by the ongoing industrial disputes and repeat service cuts to both bus and rail.

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²⁴ [Rail strikes: impact on passengers \(d3cez36w5wymj.cloudfront.net\)](https://www.d3cez36w5wymj.cloudfront.net)