

8 November 2021

## Is it too early to make a call on the ‘new norm’

The world of transport changed significantly in 2020, with suppressed movement from around mid-March, as the Covid-19 pandemic led to border closures and stay at home orders. There can be no doubt that the bus and coach industry relied on our embedded talent to respond quickly to emergency situations with flexible and innovative solutions. Bus service schedules changed, buses and stations were cleaned more; broadband capacity was released to providers enabling WFH (work from home for those that could); and bus operators provided real-time capacity information on route services. Industry's adaptation to Covid-19 has proven that capital is not the only solution - operators and employees flexed to deliver much of the change that has kept buses on the road, albeit with fewer passengers.

According to Infrastructure Australia, public transport usage in most Australian cities fell to 10-30% of normal levels in the initial lockdown in 2020 but settled at a ‘new norm’ of ~60-70% in the second half of the year. This may be a reflection of people partially returning to their workplace and working and travelling more flexibly across the day. Private motor vehicle use was the first mode to rebound to preCovid-19 levels, with more people driving to work and a significant number of households purchasing a second-hand car. Households that bought an additional car or a bike to avoid public transport are likely to use them more once the pandemic is over. A person who invests in establishing their home office is also more likely to work from home in the future. A recent WFH report from the Australian Productivity Commission shows that one-third of Australians want to work from home 3 days a week and 20 % would like to work from home full time.

Some regions are seeing a local boom of regional tourism and population, and are experiencing less severe Covid-19 impacts. There is also a shift in residential movements from major city centres to cheaper outer urban and regional centres. It falls upon the public transport sector to advise governments on bus investments and bus services requirements to avoid congestion problems and to provide safe and/or trusted alternatives to self-drive. It is important to note that 55% of Australia's road fatalities occur in regional areas. Buses will play a vital role in keeping Australians ‘road safe’ and ensuring the connectivity of regional, rural and remote communities.

So – how is our tourism sector looking?

Covid-19 will eventually shift to endemic status (we hope!). This means that whilst the coronavirus might not actively circulate in large populations, it will still make an appearance in places where immunity is low. The Delta variant has put any early predictions of a return to normal on shaky ground. The emergence of more variants with different infectious factors cannot be discounted. And whilst many countries are currently running vaccine distribution programs, it may be some time before enough of the global population are vaccinated to reach endemic status and safe international ‘travel bubbles’ can be reliably introduced and maintained.

So the truth of it is, bus businesses in the tourism sector will still need to be geared towards domestic tourism, albeit held ransom to our own domestic border open/close status. There is some social commentary (your future customer) that international flight travel is not a sustainable practice with climate change being such a pressing issue. According



# VIEW FROM CANBERRA



to the OECD, sustainability and environmentally friendly travel will become more of a priority for travellers. Visiting natural areas, regional and local destinations with shorter travel distances may see our coach tourism sector recognised as having a low environmental footprint. The BIC has long advocated to governments to support land transport tourism; to encourage tourists to travel across Australia not over it.

Dare we say the convergence of a global pandemic and consumer scrutiny on environmental impacts could actually turn out to be a windfall? – Well....let's not get too carried away heh? Regardless, there is some truth in taking the opportunity to re-think the way we sell our tourism products and services. Maybe the time is ripe to invoke a travel shorter stay longer mantra.

Whatever the go-forward message, it is clear that the tourism industry will have to find new ways of functioning while Covid-19 continues to circulate. Public transport providers will need to continually adjust for changes in patronage behaviour. Peak bodies, such as the BIC, will need to ramp up the policy and advocacy wheel and there is no better time than right now at the cold face of a looming federal election.

Bookmark your browser with [movingpeople.com.au](http://movingpeople.com.au) to stay up to date and informed on what is going on nationally with industry and the federal government.

The BIC secretariat is committed to the *moving people* vision that enhances the sustainability and liveability of Australia's cities and regions by using bus and coach transportation. Readers can connect with us on 02 6247 5990 or by email to [enquiries@bic.asn.au](mailto:enquiries@bic.asn.au).

## Bus Australia Network

