

How we travel

We have seen dramatic changes because of COVID-19. A gradual trend – working from home – has accelerated a shift that will alter how and where we live and travel. Remote working means people are spending more time in their neighbourhoods and making more trips on foot, by bike, or by local public transport. This means Transport can focus on improving the quality and sustainability of local transport infrastructure and connections.

In the regions, where remote working is currently less common, it brings opportunities for new industries, and for workforces to tap into new jobs markets – enabled by faster and more convenient transport connections.



Working from home

For many, remote working is here to stay. When the Australian Bureau of Statistics asked Australians what changes they wanted to see continue after COVID-19 restrictions ease, 33 per cent of respondents nominated working from home, and another 33 per cent chose spending more time with family and friends¹.

The pandemic highlights some of the changes that will occur as remote working becomes routine for an increasing segment of the workforce.

In the early days of the pandemic, households reduced their average weekly trips from 23.9 to 9.4 per week. Distances travelled fell by a greater extent, because commuting to work and for work-related business are easily the longest trips made – 15.3 and 16.3 kilometres respectively in metropolitan areas. These distances are higher in most regional areas². Essential trips, such as for shopping or child care, have much lower average distances, at 5.5 and six kilometres respectively.

When commuting to work and work trips are removed, household travel changes. During the first COVID-19 lockdown, walking and cycling increased to almost one-fifth of all trips, while both public transport and driving decreased.

Planning for growth

While COVID-19 has accelerated one trend, home working, it has paused another, population growth. Driven by a rapid annual increase of 1.7 per cent per annum in Greater Sydney, NSW was set to grow from 7.7 million people in 2016 to 11.8 million by 2056. Instead, by 2022, NSW will have experienced two years with almost negligible population growth.

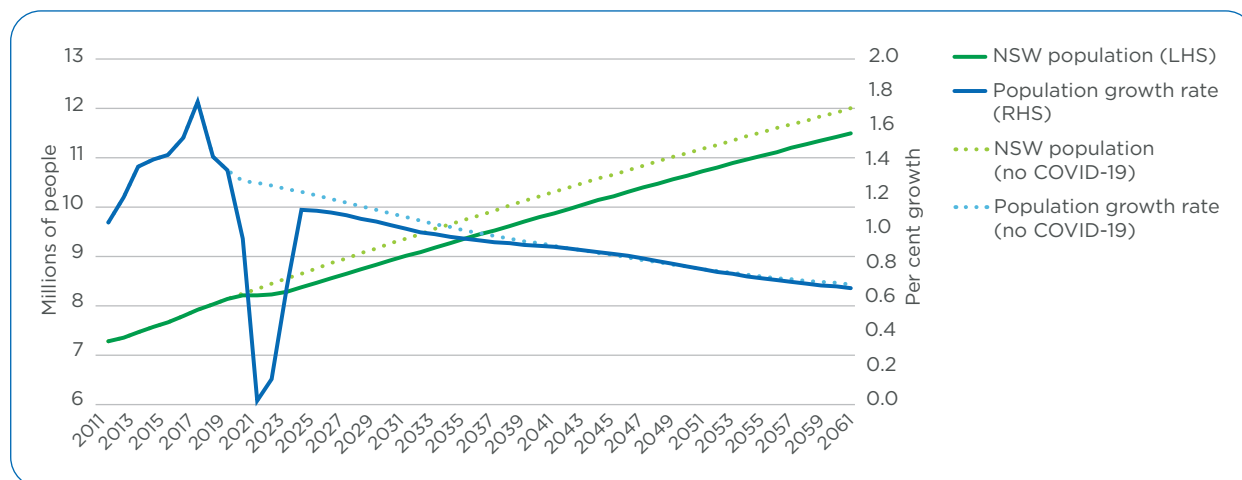
Nevertheless, population growth in urban areas will return as a powerful influence on our cities and how we travel. Post-COVID population projections show a return of immigration-driven growth in the NSW population focused in Greater Sydney, the Illawarra, Shoalhaven and the Central Coast. Our metropolitan centres, the heart of NSW's service-driven economy, will continue to grow.

Prior to COVID-19, employment in the Harbour CBD Metropolitan Centre (which includes North Sydney) was projected to grow from 584,000 in 2016 to 939,000 in 2056, a 61 per cent increase over 40 years. Even with slower growth as a result of the pandemic, and working from home levels of 20 per cent or more on any given day, our transport networks will need to accommodate hundreds of thousands more daily journeys to inner Sydney by mid-century. Other cities, such as Parramatta, will grow by even more, with pre-pandemic forecasts of 79 per cent employment growth by 2056.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics 'Household Impacts of COVID-19 survey', June 2021, Catalogue No. 4940

² Transport for NSW, 'Household Travel Survey 2018/19', 2019

NSW Population and population growth rate, with and without COVID-19³



The NSW population is expected to be smaller and older than projections prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Older populations travel shorter distances, and travel less often in peak hours. They are more likely to shop and socialise in the local area, but have a critical supporting role in extended families, implying they have more dispersed travel destinations. Safe walking conditions and accessible public transport can support healthy ageing. While some growth will be in greenfield locations with low to medium densities, an increasing proportion of growth will be in medium to high density housing close to existing and planned rail networks. Higher urban densities bring more shops, services and jobs in the local area.

Focusing on neighbourhoods

With more people spending time in their neighbourhoods, Transport has the potential to put more focus on safe and liveable local streets.

Transport infrastructure investment currently focuses on the networks that underpin our diversified, service-driven, economy. In Greater Sydney, this means roads and railways connecting neighbourhoods to highly concentrated centres of education, finance and business services. In other parts of NSW, investment has focused on corridors that support the needs of regional populations, freight movements and primary production including the Hume, Pacific, Newell and New England highways.

Approximately 90 per cent of NSW's 185,000 kilometres of roads are managed by local governments, of which up to 15,000 kilometres may be transferred to NSW Government management as part of the Road Classification Review. While programs like the State's Fixing Local Roads and the Australian Government's Roads to Recovery fund some maintenance, most of the funding and management of local roads is borne by local governments.

³ NSW Treasury, '2021-22 NSW Intergenerational Report, 2021', p. 34

Local governments understand the travel needs of their residents and businesses, and the importance of place in the local economy. Recent examples of improvements include:

- › The Levee, which has transformed Maitland's relationship to the river, refurbished the mall and upgraded laneways and walking connections.
- › The Kendal Street upgrade in Cowra, which reflects the strong role of hospitality, retailing and food in a much-visited local economy.
- › In Singleton, the NSW Government has supported the upgrade of John Street to transform it into a destination for dining, recreation, retail and leisure.

State-managed roads can be important retail and civic streets too, so the NSW Government has adopted the Movement and Place Framework to make better decisions about valued places. Investing in the quality and appeal of streets will become even more important as local businesses seek to compete with online shopping.

Better high streets can contribute to more walkable and liveable neighbourhoods only if people can reach them safely and comfortably. Many suburbs have been designed to maximise the convenience of driving, with inconsistent or missing footpaths, and roads designed for higher speeds than are allowed today. Those neighbourhoods are uncomfortable and unsafe for walking or cycling, especially for children. That may account for the low numbers of children walking or cycling to school – between 37 and 50 per cent of children of all ages walk to school, and between nine and 13 per cent of children cycle to school.⁴

Delivering better neighbourhoods

Enabling thousands of small improvements across our cities and regions requires the NSW Government to understand opportunities, and any barriers to change.

Funding is a key issue, as communities with resources to invest in their neighbourhoods may not always have the greatest need. Inner metropolitan councils often enjoy both the benefits of higher land values (and hence rates income) and better background conditions: more walkable settlement patterns, more urban canopy, lower average road speeds and less exposure to extreme heat.

In regional and outer metropolitan areas, available resources may be lower, but the challenges are not: less walkable urban block patterns, a hotter climate, higher road speeds and, in many metropolitan areas, competing resource demands of rapid population growth. New approaches and funding partnerships may be required to ensure all of NSW can benefit from investment in neighbourhoods.

Local infrastructure accelerated

Amid surging demand for safe outdoor spaces, Transport has accelerated the delivery of neighbourhood projects.

We sought good ideas from local government, simplified approvals processes, and established cross-disciplinary project teams to implement the projects.

In Lennox Head, we worked with Ballina Shire Council to trial a 30 km/hr zone with streetscape improvements funded by the NSW Government's Streets as Shared Spaces Fund. This successfully calmed traffic, and the council has since made the changes permanent.

In the City of Sydney and Randwick council areas we removed red tape to roll out cycleways.

⁴ The University of South Australia, 'Active Healthy Kids Australia', Adelaide, 2015.

Achieving community support for safer and more walkable local networks can be difficult. A pedestrian crossing that helps one family get their children safely to school might make it harder for another to park. Cycleway infrastructure is particularly contentious. Councils must try to balance local views with broader community and sustainability benefits.

Stronger strategic guidance and support by Transport could help. Individual guidelines, technical directions and regulatory instruments may need to be modernised to reflect current priorities and emerging transport trends, such as e-bikes and other forms of micromobility. Transport has recently revised numerical warrants to make it simpler for councils to install pedestrian crossings. Streamlining approvals, especially the traffic committee process, may allow resources to be shifted from paperwork to projects.

Local network investments are smaller projects than the arterial and State significant infrastructure projects managed by the Australian and NSW governments. New cooperative delivery and funding models may be needed to take advantage of the skill and local knowledge of councils, and ensure a clear pipeline of work fosters competition and value for money.

One way of trialling new approaches is by Transport working in close partnership with local authorities, businesses, schools and communities on a demonstration project that focuses on liveability and safety improvements in a defined neighbourhood.



What are the systematic barriers or opportunities for the NSW Government improving local streets for walking, cycling and better neighbourhood liveability?

How can the NSW Government ensure equitable access to resources for local improvements across the State?

Living in the regions

Workers who no longer need to commute every day to a workplace will have greater choices about where they live. Given the very high costs of housing in Greater Sydney, particularly middle- and inner-ring suburbs, migration to the regions may increase and fewer regional residents may move to large centres for work.

Remote working is a significant opportunity for regional economies. Incomes in regional areas are lower than the NSW average, whereas in Greater Sydney they are higher than average. Enabling a regional workforce to tap into well-paid jobs in metropolitan areas could help regional communities prosper and grow.

Research suggests many employers will adopt a hybrid way of working with many employees still at the workplace once or twice a week. Total time spent on commuting will be reduced, but efficient transport connections will still be required for residents in regional areas to take full advantage of the new opportunities.

The NSW Government's Fast Rail network could provide the necessary links. The NSW Government, with the support of the Australian Government, is investigating the potential for a staged roll out of faster rail connections linking Greater Sydney to Canberra, Nowra, Newcastle and the Central West. Fast rail could not only enable remote working opportunities for existing regional workforces, but drive economic growth in the regions, while offering greater choices for people across NSW about where to live, work and do business.



What transport improvements would allow the regions to capitalise on increased remote or hybrid ways of working?



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What happens to my feedback?

Thank you for sharing your views with Transport for NSW. We will consider your input and will share the draft Future Transport Strategy when it is published via the email address you provided.